Neoliberal Urbane and the Right to the City: A View from Beirut’s Periphery

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Lefebvre’s theorization of space in order to examine the compatibility of neoliberalism and the right to the city, this study investigates how the formation of informal settlements since the 1950s had provided low-income dwellers in Beirut (Lebanon) a means to conceive of and engage in city making (neighbourhood production, management, and organization) at a time when state regulations and/or market constraints would have excluded them from the city. It also examines how the prevailing neoliberal ideology of the 1990s, as translated through Lebanon’s sectarian-clientelist regime, is curtailing these possibilities. Evidence for the article was drawn from interviews with dwellers, developers and public officials, as well as from archival searches and aerial photographs.

INTRODUCTION

The ‘right to the city’ has since the 1960s provided a powerful framework to support infringement of property rights and building regulations by low-income urban dwellers. By squatting land and creating new urban quarters that correspond to their visions and needs, it has been argued, low-income groups can inscribe their presence in the otherwise inaccessible city. The argument builds on Lefebvre’s early theorization of ‘slums’ or ‘informal settlements’ as spaces where dwellers are able to position the use value of land ahead of its exchange value, and impose a form of spatial appropriation and production that defies those dictated by state capitalism.
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(Bey, 1991; Shields, 1998). A reading of the social history of Beirut (Lebanon) in the decades following the country’s independence in 1943 indeed supports the theory; the proliferation of informal settlements historically provided a foothold and stepping stone for many migrants who would have otherwise been excluded from the city. However, in light of the intensification of neoliberal trends in the organization and management of the Lebanese economy since the 1990s, can these neighbourhoods be sustained as embodiments of the ‘right to the city’? In other words, are neoliberalism and the ‘right to the city’ compatible?

To examine these questions, this study documents the history of production from inception to the present of three major informal settlements in the suburbs of Beirut (Map 1). Drawing on the framework proposed by Lefebvre (1968, 1974), emphasis is given to the question of how their formation provided low-income newcomers a means to conceive of and engage in city making at a time when state regulations and/or market constraints would have excluded these would-be dwellers from the city. The article also examines how the prevailing neoliberal ideology of the 1990s, as translated through Lebanon’s sectarian-clientelist regime on the ground, is curtailing the possibilities for low-income dwellers to participate in the physical production, organization and management of their neighbourhoods — in short, revoking the ‘right to the city’.

Methodology

The three investigated neighbourhoods (Map 1) are part of the network of informal settlements that developed at the fringes of the capital city starting in the 1940s, in violation of urban and building regulations (Bourgey and Phares, 1973; Fawaz and Peillen, 2002), with many of the same patterns and processes that have been observed elsewhere in the developing world (Fernandes and Varley, 1998; Ward, 1982). The first, Hayy

2. Neoliberal policies are defined here as those interventions that seek to inscribe and/or further entrench market forms of relations in everyday practices (Harvey, 2007). These policies lead to the predominance of competition as a way of managing urban spaces in contrast to principles of redistribution which were upheld in earlier eras, and to the transfer of many authorities, that were typically in the hands of the state, to unaccountable non-state and quasi state bodies such as corporations and non-governmental organizations (Hall and Hubbard, 1996; Keyder, 2005; Zumino, 2006). Neoliberal policies are widely recognized to be path dependent, meaning that neoliberalism materializes differently according to contextual histories and realities (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Larner, 2003). Further elaboration of the concept in Lebanon is developed in the next section of the paper.

3. The same reasons given in the urban planning literature for the development of so-called informal settlements in the Third World are applicable to Lebanon. These include the following: (i) adopting modern, rigid regulations for land subdivision and building construction that conflicted with existing modes of housing provision and with the financial capacities of urban dwellers; (ii) requirements for building permit approvals from several institutions (e.g. local and central town planning institutes, municipalities, syndicates of
el-Sellom (Choueyfat), is located in the southern suburbs of the capital city and is today considered Beirut’s largest informal settlement with an estimated population of 100,000. The other two, Z‘aytriyyeh and Rouwaysat, are located in Beirut’s eastern suburbs; they are considerably smaller, with a joint population of 30,000. These neighbourhoods were selected as case studies because their common history of permanent settlement, which dates back to the 1950s, provides adequate grounds to look at the historic process of informal housing production (all three relied on illegal land subdivisions, constructions and self-help service provision). These case studies also show how this informal housing production has been affected by contemporary changes in urban policies. Furthermore, the geographic position of each of these neighbourhoods in the sectarian map of post-war Beirut allows a comparison of the effects of neoliberal urban policies in relation to the local impacts of religious tensions, which differ from one neighbourhood to another.

Evidence for this article was drawn from detailed interviews with dwellers and/or developers as well as public officials who have been involved in these neighbourhoods since the 1950s. Archival searches were also conducted in public records in order to understand maps, building permits, documents for lot subdivisions, records of sales, etc. Aerial photographs were used to trace the changing physical morphologies of urban production in the three areas.

The following section presents the theoretical framework that guided this research, introducing the notion of the ‘right to the city’ and how...
it can be employed in an investigation of the effects of neoliberal urban policies on informal settlements. I then develop the three case studies in relation to this theoretical framework and present the paper’s main conclusions.
INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS AND THE ‘RIGHT TO THE CITY’

The Right to the City: A Theoretical Formulation

The concept of the ‘right to the city’ was put forth by Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s as a political programme that aimed to strengthen the ability of ‘city-zens’ to take charge of processes of spatial production (Lefebvre, 1968, 1974; see also Dikeç, 2001; Purcell, 2002, 2003; Shields, 1998). It entailed two intertwined rights: (1) the right to participate in the conception, design and implementation of the production of urban spaces, shifting decisions about the production of these spaces away from the state, towards urban residents; and (2) the right to appropriate — through access, occupation and use — urban spaces and produce them in ways that would meet the needs of urban inhabitants, hence shifting control away from capital that conceptualizes space as a commodity that can be exchanged in the form of property rights (Lefebvre, 1974; Logan and Molotch, 1987).

This original formulation of the concept differs considerably from the way ‘the right to the city’ has been used by theorists and policymakers since the 1970s within a normative framework of redistributive justice. In the latter formulation, ‘the right to the city’ is evoked to support the entitlement of informal settlement dwellers to access public services (for example, water and electricity), regardless of violations of property rights or urban rules and building codes and/or to ‘regularize’ their settlements and integrate them in wider urban markets (Miraftab and Wills, 2005; UN-Habitat International Coalition, n.d.). In contrast, Lefebvre’s conception of the ‘right to the city’ is for the dwellers to retain the ability to produce their spaces without conforming to the dominant modes of spatial production, to participate in re-shaping the existing norms and forces in which space is being produced within the capitalist order, rather than being themselves engulfed in its modes (Dikeç, 2001; 2002; Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1968).

The ‘right to the city’ has recently regained the attention of scholars looking for a framework to address the growing disenfranchisement of urban inhabitants in the context of contemporary neoliberal policy making (Friedman, 1988; Harvey, 2008; Isin, 2000; McCann, 2002, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Purcell, 2002, 2003; Simone, 2005). These authors have identified the potentials of Lefebvre’s formulation of the concept to reform traditional models of public participation by, for example, replacing national citizenship as a prerequisite for political participation by other forms of entitlement, such as inhabitance (Martin et al., 2003). Most of these investigations are, however, directed towards reforming existing state models of governance and thinking of strategies and legal frameworks that can render them more inclusive. They are also generally applied in the context of Western democracies where researchers are reacting to the growing powers of multinational corporations and arguing the need for forums where inhabitants are able to influence the decisions that big capital takes when it shapes their spaces
(Martin et al., 2003; Purcell, 2002). Similar arguments have been deployed in reference to urban planning reforms in lower-income countries, especially in Colombia and Brazil where more inclusive and participatory processes of planning are invoking the ‘right to the city’ in their formulation. The United Nations has also put forth a proposal for a ‘World Charter of the Right to the City’ that relies on the legal system in order to secure inclusiveness in urban planning practices (Fernandes, 2007).

Although these formulations somewhat limit the ‘right to the city’ to distributive justice and conceptualization of participation only in state-sanctioned public forums, they provide an essential contribution to thinking about informal settlements in relation to the ‘right to the city’ and neoliberal policy making: the search for inclusive frameworks in which decisions about the production of space can be taken, and the recognition of the social/use value of property which needs to be strengthened vis-à-vis the dominance of exchange value (Dikeç, 2001, 2002; Purcell, 2003).

Informal Settlements as the ‘Right to the City’

Lefebvre argued that ‘slums’ were a physical embodiment of the ‘right to the city’ in the sense that dwellers in these neighbourhoods conceptualize their spatial presence and practices in ways that depart from state-sanctioned and market-dictated norms of social spatialization (Bey, 1991; Shields, 1998). This perception of slums is, however, not completely accurate. Indeed, research over the past three decades has indicated that the production of informal housing never happens entirely outside the framework of the capitalist land market or state-sanctioned regulations, but rather in relation to and in direct negotiation with them (Benton, 1994; Fawaz, 2009; Razzaz, 1998; Varley, 2002). On the one hand, these investigations show that processes of land acquisition do not happen ‘freely’, meaning that dwellers always pay some cost for squatting or accessing land, although its monetized value remains well below that ascribed by the capitalist land market, hence tilting the balance between the relative influence of use and exchange values. Furthermore, the development of these neighbourhoods generally contributes to reducing property values in their vicinities, challenging capitalist interests in real estate markets. On the other hand, these neighbourhoods are produced according to regulations and principles that deviate from and bend

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7. In Brazil, these reforms have translated into revisions of the country’s constitution (in 1988) that include a recognition of the social function of property rights in land, a (perhaps unique) formulation of property rights in line with what Lefebvre advocated — outside its role as a commodity for exchange. These reforms also included changes in planning practices, such as developing ‘new master plans’ that adopt social justice as a goal (rather than physical modernization) or endorse participatory budgeting as a method of allocating municipal funds (De Souza, 2001; Fernandes, 2007). With respect to informal settlements and services in Morocco, see Navez-Bouchanine (2003).
state-sanctioned urban regulations, without ever completely stepping outside them (Azuela de la Cueva, 1987; Fawaz, 2009).

Informal settlements nonetheless still present an alternative model of spatial organization in which, for example, dwellers rely on social networks and other informal institutions in order to build their spaces and organize their services (Turner and Fichter, 1972). This is manifested in the sequences in which their homes are built and consolidated, which rarely follow those dictated by state regulations (such as land purchase, permitting, servicing, building, occupation) and abide instead by the logic of household needs and the pattern of negotiation with public authorities8 (Razzaz, 1994; Ward and Macoloo, 1992). The physical form and organization of these neighbourhoods respects social principles such as local notions of privacy or safety, rather than building codes sanctioned by state engineers. The channels of financing depend on informal credit organizations (Pamuk, 2000), family relations and informal exchanges (Varley, 2002) rather than formal lending agencies. Most important, the management of these neighbourhoods relies on local neighbourhood committees and social forms of organization and, ultimately, their production presents a model of local control over the production of space, without ever being definitive or completely independent of state or market authorities (Berry-Chikhanoui and Deboulet, 2000; Fernandes and Varley, 1998; Ward, 1982).

How have these spaces of alternative city making fared during the past decades of neoliberal urban policies? In other words, how do the neoliberal forces reshaping models and approaches to urban governance influence the ability of low-income dwellers, notably new migrants to the city, to shape, organize and control their dwelling spaces? The following sections explore these questions in the three case studies selected for this article.

INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN THE PRE-WAR ERA

Three Case Studies in Lebanon

Shortly after Lebanon’s independence in 1943, migrants from the country’s poor (predominantly Muslim Shiite) rural areas began moving towards the capital city which was rapidly gaining in size (Faour, 1981). Migrants looked for affordable housing near employment opportunities in a city that had already begun to display the landscapes of large social inequalities (Traboulsi, 2008). In the Beirut of the 1950s and 1960s, as land was being developed for the more established classes of society and urban policy and regulations were resulting in the formation of new modern quarters in the city (Kassir, 2003; Tabet, 2001), some of these migrants forged spaces for themselves

8. For example, public authorities are generally inclined to service well-consolidated houses and not precarious structures.
where they were able to acquire land, build homes incrementally, access services and eventually take charge of the organization of new urban neighbourhoods, which constituted an integral part of how the city was being built at the time (Bourgey and Pharès, 1973; Fawaz and Peillen, 2002).

The case study neighbourhoods — Z’aytriyyeh (Fanar), Rouwaysat (Jdeideh) and Hayy el-Sellom (Choueyfat) — are three informal settlements whose first urbanization dates back to the 1950s when, in different circumstances, similar social groups composed essentially of impoverished (Muslim Shiite) rural dwellers arrived in the suburbs of Beirut where they looked for employment and established residence. These early comers settled first in rented accommodations and sometimes in refugee camps which provided affordable access to space in the city. As the stay in the capital city extended, however, these families sought to consolidate their presence through home ownership, as the opportunities arose. In the eastern suburbs of Beirut (Z’aytriyyeh and Rouwaysat), this happened when formal developers initiated large land subdivision projects consisting of several hundred lots each and designed to accommodate the construction of individual villas (following the American suburban housing model that was then being promoted in the region). However, the developers had poorly estimated the middle-income demand for such housing and their miscalculations created an occasion for low-income dwellers to purchase lots which would have otherwise been inaccessible to them.9 Elsewhere, in the then less ‘desirable’ southern suburbs of Beirut (Choueyfat) where land was less subject to speculation during the 1950s and 1960s, the opportunity for low-income migrants to acquire land was facilitated by a local (Christian) entrepreneur, a grocery store owner, who initiated an illegal land subdivision business that eventually turned into Hayy el-Sellom.10

In all three neighbourhoods, the dwellers were faced with severe challenges before they could consolidate their residence in the city. As farmers and peasants, they lacked know-how and experience in the administrative structures of the city. Moreover, as working-class Muslim Shiites, they were moving in areas governed and inhabited by populations of different religious (Fanar and Jdeideh were dominantly Christian and Choueyfat Druze) and social (middle-class) profiles. They therefore had to bridge religious and social divides — and sometimes animosity — in order to inscribe their new

9. In Fanar, these households transformed a section of two large developments into a low-income neighbourhood of incrementally built housing that was eventually named Z’aytriyyeh, in reference to the largest tribe (Z’ayer) who had settled there. In Jdeideh, where developers had failed to account for the negative environmental effects of nearby quarries when they planned a high-end housing development on the site where workers had squatted for years, the entire land development project was eventually turned into a low-income residential neighbourhood, Rouwaysat.

10. The grocer acted in partnership with rural migrants and established a relatively large development business in the area that earned him money and eventually political clout (Fawaz, 2008).
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residency. Furthermore, and given the electoral political system in Lebanon where voting rights are generally maintained in one’s area of origin rather than residence, they lacked political representation in their new area and had to establish alternative forms of organizing in order to influence local decision makers. It is in overcoming these difficulties that the newcomers to the city established, as I show below, their ‘right to the city’ during the 1960s and 1970s.

The Physical Process of Urban Production

In all three neighbourhoods, the physical process of housing production and distribution was managed either directly or indirectly by members of the neighbourhood population. In each case, a handful of men established themselves as mediators, working for landowners or developers and earning income by recruiting clients (co-villagers or kin) and securing land sales for transacting parties. In Jdeideh and Choueyfet, some of these mediators eventually became developers themselves, organizing land subdivisions and sales. To achieve this, they had to penetrate an otherwise hermetic market, which excluded them on the basis of class and religion. In Fanar, rural migrants forged deals with Jewish land developers who, as outsiders to the area, helped them acquire land for housing. They thus bypassed local developers who were reluctant to sell them land because they were vulnerable to the social pressures exercised by the middle-income Christian community that resisted the settlement of working-class Shiites in its territories. In Rouwaysat and Hayy el-Sellom, where informal settlement required a complex process of managing illegal lot subdivisions, land sales and property transfer without a formal subdivision scheme and hence the institutional support of the state, a number of rural migrants-turned-developers built a thick web of social relations across religious and class divides that sustained

11. As a legal procedure, the transfer of voter registration is an easy step that allows migrants within the country to change their official residence and vote in their new area of dwelling. In practice, however, this is a very complicated process that requires strong political support because local political blocks resist any change in the balance of power. Conversely, rural migrants are also often reluctant to switch their voter registration since they benefit from clientelistic relations with the (feudal) political representatives in their areas of origin. Thus, most Lebanese rural migrants continue to vote in their (rural) areas of origin although they might have lived in the city for several generations. For more on local elections and regulations, see Favier (2001). Non-Lebanese nationals have no official representation in the political system.

12. Since sales happened in instalments over several months, it was necessary for developers and clients to insure a level of security that would guarantee full payment for the developer and/or landowner and the quality of the lot (that no public plans were going on there, for example) for the client.
Furthermore, in each of the three neighbourhoods, building construction became the guarded turf of a handful of men who were recognized as ‘the’ master builders of their quarters. Each ran a team of (often Syrian migrant) construction workers and nurtured a network of social relations that secured their building operations (building material suppliers, local police authorities and patrols, etc.). Political manoeuvring was also integrated in the strategies of some of these migrants among whom a minority managed to transfer their voter registration to the new areas of residence. This was achieved with the help of modest (local) Christian families seeking political ascension: they exchanged votes for services, eventually becoming a recognized (albeit modest) voting bloc in the local municipal districts where their settlements were located.

The process of urban settlement, for most newcomers, was intertwined with the very production (conception and implementation) of the neighbourhood. By building their houses, these informal settlement dwellers produced spaces in alternative forms to those imagined/dictated by the market (suburban villas) and state codes (for example, building law requirements). In Z’aytriyyeh and Rouwaysat, migrants adapted relatively large lots (700–2,000 m²) and re-subdivided them among four to six property owners while in Hayy el-Sellom, developers and mediators subdivided large lots of several thousand square meters into smaller, affordable units of 100–200 m² which were then sold to newcomers. Migrants built temporary structures (shacks built with make-shift materials), which they gradually consolidated into what became, by the mid-1970s, multi-storey apartment buildings, often shared by members of the same family (father and sons). Urban services were never available and their provision required organization and involvement on the part of individual homeowners who were hence de facto participants in their installation. In short, even those dwellers who did not derive business and income from the production of the city — because they were neither developers nor builders — were still active players in the making of the neighbourhood, participating in its construction and servicing.

**Neighbourhood Committees**

The patterns of settlement, which followed kin and geographic trajectories, were translated into the formation of sub-neighbourhoods in each of the three areas where members of the same family and/or village congregated. As a result, newcomers accessed a solidarity network, which they

13. Ties were developed with property owners and with public actors, such as state-accredited topographers who organized the physical subdivision and measurement of lots, notaries public who registered temporary and final sales, low-level employees in the Land Registry who facilitated the final registration, municipal agents who helped in service acquisition, etc.
derived from the proximity of members of the same family, the shared experience of displacement, the maintained relations with the villages of origin and sometimes solid and active tribal networks. These tight social relations eventually facilitated the formation of neighbourhood committees in each of three neighbourhoods that managed self-help service provision (such as sewerage systems and road pavement), lobbied for inclusion in public networks and organized the construction of the neighbourhood mosque. Composed of locally respected figures who were selected by consensus among the largest families and early settlers, these committees acted as community representatives: they sought recognition for the neighbourhood from municipal authorities and service agencies and visited elected representatives in their areas of origin (where most of the migrants still voted) in order to strengthen their positions in this negotiation. During the 1970s, when the descent into civil war began, their advocacy role shifted towards negotiations with the successive militias that controlled the areas. Members of these committees also settled disputes about property boundaries, disagreements about construction and issues of privacy, and other challenges that emerged as the neighbourhoods were being built.

The Neighbourhoods during the Civil War

The civil war (1975–90) divided Beirut into two belligerent sections and the location of each neighbourhood in the sectarian geography of the warring city dictated its trajectory. As of 1975, both Rouwaysat and Z’aytriyyeh fell under the control of right-wing Christian militias, who forcefully evicted most of their neighbourhood dwellers and used their houses in order to accommodate their own constituencies, often themselves displaced from other areas of Beirut. As the war extended, patterns of land ownership changed considerably in these two neighbourhoods, especially in Rouwaysat where owners opted to sell their properties since they did not plan to return. Urban production more or less came to a halt in these two neighbourhoods, mostly because the militias in control of the area judged these spaces to be undesirable. In efforts to prevent the future development of informal housing, policies were initiated to encourage industrial development and in the case of Z’aytriyyeh, the area indeed changed land use, acquiring a large base of furniture and other light industrial establishments.

In contrast, Hayy el-Sellom was integrated during this period into the growing southern suburbs of the city, a well-defined and established residential and commercial area of Greater Beirut known as the mostly (Muslim)
Shiite district of the city.\textsuperscript{15} As mentioned in the introduction, Hayy el-Sellom grew between 1975 and 1995 from a small neighbourhood to become the largest informal settlement of Beirut, with a population estimated at 100,000 dwellers. During that phase, many of the migrants who had worked as mediators became developers themselves, approaching (the mostly Christian) landowners who were now eager to dispose of property that had become undesirable. Under the control of hostile militias, sub-dividing lots without public overview (since planning agencies were considerably weakened by the military strife) meant that these new developers could sell the lots to new migrants who themselves now built multi-storey apartments to rent out. The process of spatial production was hence considerably democratized with many opportunities now available for recent migrants to take part in lucrative economic linkages.

**The ‘Right to the City’?**

In many ways, the early formation of these neighbourhoods exemplified the enactment of a ‘right to the city’ that combined Lefebvre’s two dimensions of spatial appropriation and participation in the decisions that shape the neighbourhoods. The strategies described above illustrate how different groups of dwellers, all of them newcomers to the city, imagined alternative ways of city making and, in negotiation with dominant, state-regulated forms of spatial control, succeeded in consolidating their presence in the city from illegal occupants or short-term tenants to actual homeowners, service managers and sometimes voters.

I do not wish to project the image of an idealized past. It is certainly true that these neighbourhoods remained somewhat stigmatized by their surroundings, easy to point to as ‘poor’ or unable to meet construction and service standards dictated by city authorities. Furthermore, during the early days of neighbourhood formation, home ownership was not necessarily accessible to all; it was, however, far more achievable through these channels of informal production. Neither were the forms of social organization all inclusive and democratic. Rather, they replicated the same social hierarchies that organized the societies that produced them, leaving, for example, membership in neighbourhood committees solely to men who were able to show solid family and/or regional backing, while women — who did most of the menial service work — were never included in formal processes of decision making. Similarly, women weren’t allowed in the land development or building construction businesses. Property records also indicate that the

\textsuperscript{15} Although these suburbs are stigmatized as ‘poor’ and/or ‘disorganized’, condemned as ‘illegal’ because of many violations of property rights and urban regulations, and associated with Shiite political parties (Harb, 2003), they are also undeniably an established residential and business section of the city.
percentage of women acquiring home ownership was far lower than for men, even though oral testimonies indicate that many of them sold jewellery and precious belongings to help defray the price of home ownership. However, these opportunities to appropriate space and participate in the decisions that shape neighbourhoods in the city (and ultimately, what Beirut is as a city) exemplify the possibility, to paraphrase Lefebvre, not only to access some of the services and commodities that the city offered, but also to take part in shaping and organizing its landscapes.

INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS TODAY AND NEOLIBERAL REFORMS IN URBAN GOVERNANCE

Neoliberalism in Lebanon: An Old Story?

Many of the approaches adopted in the post-civil war reconstruction in Lebanon can be ascribed to a neoliberal tendency in the conception of the role and position of the state (Nagel, 2000; Schmid, 2006). Indeed, the first fifteen years following the end of sectarian military conflicts (1990–2005) were emblematic of a market-led development approach in which many of the principles generally associated with neoliberal policy making, such as the liberalization of social services, the allocation of public subsidies to the market, and others (Harvey, 2007) were widely adopted. To claim, however, that a dramatic neoliberal shift occurred in the patterns of urban governance in Lebanon would be inaccurate. To the contrary, if neoliberalism is understood as a further entrenchment of the market mechanisms in daily activities (Dikeç, 2006; Harvey, 2007) through the delegation, for example, of the social component of public administration to private actors, then it falls well within the lines of the so-called liberal approach to policy making that has been adopted in Lebanon since independence. In this model, the provision of healthcare, housing subsidies, schooling and other basic needs is delegated to non-state actors, predominantly religious authorities and institutions that respond to their own constituencies’ needs. Among these religious communities, Shiites historically suffered from the absence of formal public representation until the late 1960s and Shiite formal religious authorities remain less influential than others in the country. However, in post-war Lebanon, Shiite political parties Amal and especially

16. It was in 1969, with the establishment of the al-Majlis al Shi‘I al a‘la (The Higher Shiite Council) by a social movement led at the time by Imam Musa al-Sadr, that the Shiites gained formal public representation in state authorities (Ajami, 1987; Norton, 1987).

17. Amal was founded in 1974 as a social and political movement seeking social justice in the country and resistance to Israeli incursions in South Lebanon. During the civil war, Amal degenerated into a Shiite militia. In post-war Lebanon, Amal has played a central role as a political party representing Shiites in national politics (Ajami, 1987; Norton, 1987).
Hezbollah\textsuperscript{18} have emerged to play a central role in the country — in lieu of religious authorities — and they have provided services such as health care and schooling to their constituencies as well as positioning themselves as the recognized political representatives for the Shiite community.

The last decade has, however, also introduced changes that have intensified some of the historical practices and lost some of the earlier concessions made by this ‘liberal’ model of service provision, such as the dismantling of rent control and the elimination of several social ministries. A similar tendency to decrease social responsibility is visible in the private sector where large-scale employers, who traditionally provided benefits to their employees (such as health care, schooling, etc.), are now opting to hire daily workers (often foreign migrants) in order to avoid long-term welfare responsibilities. The outcomes of these changes are widely felt among the dwellers of the settlements. They recurrently complain about the changing conditions of their employment and the fragility of their means of subsidy.

Neoliberal urban governance has also resulted in attempts at administrative reform, often under pressure from international organizations, such as decentralization policies or privatization, which effectively shift the responsibility for the provision of social goods to (often weak and poorly funded) local authorities.\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps the clearest mark of the neoliberal influence is visible in urban policy making where the role of the public planner has shifted towards entrepreneurialism and been mobilized to boost Beirut as a competitive regional centre attracting global and regional finance and service industries.\textsuperscript{20} This shift has been evident in heavy investments in the tourist and service sectors serving the visions and needs of the wealthiest groups (local and regional). Examples of this are the construction of a new international airport with the capacity to host six times the current levels of air traffic; the development of large-scale megaprojects intended to attract corporate investments and reconfigure existing land uses (such as the Beirut downtown), facilitating the establishment of gated communities and upmarket entertainment areas for the rich; and the proliferation of new forms of private policing and security systems (Map 2). The rapid gentrification of

\textsuperscript{18} Hezbollah (the Party of God) is best known for its leadership of the military resistance against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon since its foundation in 1983 (Charara, 1996; Qasim, 2002). Hezbollah is also an established political party in Lebanon with ministers in the cabinet and deputies in the parliament. The party also runs several NGOs that provide an array of social services in areas of predominantly Shiite constituencies (Fawaz, 2005; Harb, forthcoming; Harb and Leenders, 2005).

\textsuperscript{19} Decentralization reforms have been implemented only slowly because of well-engrained traditions in public centralization that have prevented an effective devolution of power. Despite a few successful attempts (such as the national mail services), privatization strategies have been slowed down by the environment of high political risk that discourages private investors from actually taking over public service agencies (Favier, 2001).

\textsuperscript{20} For an analytic investigation of how neoliberal policies have translated in the urban context, see Brenner and Theodore (2002); Dikeç (2006); Smith (2002).
many of the low and middle-income neighbourhoods in and around the city centre was also considerably facilitated by urban policy, ultimately leading to a restructuring of the social composition of Beirut. This section looks at the effects of these changes on informal settlements in relation to the opportunities they provide for newcomers to the city.
The Three Neighbourhoods in the Post-Civil War Era

The location of the neighbourhoods in post-war Beirut continues to play a central role, since the geography of religiously homogeneous enclaves has been largely maintained (Genberg, 2002). Within this geographic division, Rouwaysat and Z‘aytriyyeh are located today in the predominantly Christian eastern suburbs of Beirut where Muslim Shiite dwellers negotiate their presence and activities with relatively hostile municipal authorities and face the animosity of surrounding Christian populations, and the heavy legacy of a civil conflict that set most of the two neighbourhoods’ populations in opposition to their surroundings. In this context, only those who did not manage to consolidate their tenure elsewhere in the city during the years of civil war came back to the places from which they had been evicted, while the majority preferred to rent out their property and live elsewhere. Furthermore, many Christian property owners in Rouwaysat who had purchased buildings during the years of civil war opted to move out of the neighbourhood and rent-out their apartments, rather than co-habitate with the returning Shiite families. In contrast, outward population movements in Hayy el-Sellom have been low and the neighbourhood continues to accommodate a growing demand for affordable housing, which, given the scarcity of land, increases its population density. Dwellers nonetheless face tedious negotiations with distant (Druze) municipal authorities who, again, are only accountable to a very small minority of the dwellers.

The effects of population movements and growing demand have materialized in all three settlements in a change in the patterns of tenure whereby rental has become the dominant mode of housing acquisition. This demand for rental accommodation is further fuelled by large waves of international migrant workers, generally single men and women who occupy the lowest employment echelons in the Lebanese labour market (menial services, construction work, etc.). Given the perceived temporariness of their stay, these workers (especially the men) tend to settle for poor living conditions such as below street-level apartments with poor lighting etc., and resort to pooling in high numbers in order to share the rent. The process of pooling among several (up to ten) income earners, sometimes taking shifts to use a bed, allows these workers to pay higher (aggregate) rents than families, who generally depend on a single income and spend a large share of their earnings on child health care and education, thus creating a competition from

21. It is generally only in the very rich and very poor areas of the city that one can witness some religious mixing within residential quarters.
22. Interviewed dwellers and municipal officials estimated that 25 per cent of the original property owners of Z‘aytriyyeh (including descendants) and a slightly larger percentage of Rouwaysat’s (or their descendants) have returned to these neighbourhoods, where they attempt to re-establish residence and find employment in the vicinities. These figures are individual estimates and are not based on actual surveys.
below for affordable housing. It also provides landlords with disincentives to improve the quality of the housing stock and encourages those who can afford to return to their areas of origin and/or rent apartments for themselves elsewhere and rent out their often re-subdivided houses or apartments for profit. Major transformations have occurred in the neighbourhoods where the majority of dwellers are now tenants and where property owners, who were historically vested in the neighbourhood, have come to look at their properties in the area in terms of exchange value and rent, rather than use value.

Neoliberal Policies and Informal Settlements

The Process of Urban Production

One of the main reflections of neoliberal urban policy on the city at large is the unfettered rise of land prices which resulted from foreign/expatriate demand on land in a context where property is aggressively marketed as a commodity and no public policy attempts are made to control or limit land speculation (Aveline, 2000).\(^{23}\) This is happening in the context of a dysfunctional housing market, which is marred with severe segmentation and a large and unmet demand for affordable housing, which was exacerbated by the liberalization of rent and the absence of credit facilities addressing the needs of the urban middle- and low-income groups.\(^{24}\) These forces have had many repercussions on the channels and processes of housing production and on the possibility and accessibility of home ownership for low-income dwellers in the city. In the three informal settlements under consideration, they have rendered incremental housing production impossible, since more intensive processes of construction involving multi-storey apartment buildings are necessary to discount the price of land and distribute it over as many households as possible. Consequently, the nature of the exchanged housing product has changed from a small land parcel that can be built over several years to a finished apartment in a large housing complex. Furthermore, the production of this new form of housing entails capital-intensive forms of housing production that rely on bank loans in order to secure the required capital for land acquisition and building construction. Yet access to bank

\(^{23}\) This is not to say that land was not marketed as a commodity earlier. However, part of the urban ‘entrepreneurship’ trend is to market it further and facilitate its acquisition by non-Lebanese nationals, triggering further rises in prices, especially when oil prices peak.\(^{24}\) By way of example, the Public Housing Corporation which provides subsidized housing credit, targets an income bracket of US$ 1,200–2,000. Matching this with the national distribution of incomes published by the National Agency for Statistics in 1998 shows that 70 per cent of households in the country are too poor to be eligible for the most affordable and subsidized credits. More information on the housing market is available in Fawaz (2003).
loans is reserved for developers with previous experience and credentials, obviously beyond the means of the local homebuilders who historically built these neighbourhoods.

As a result, and especially in the case of Hayy el-Sellom where the building sector became attractive to developers who operate at the scale of the southern suburbs of the city, it is impossible for the local actors who traditionally controlled the neighbourhood to continue to participate in the process of housing production. The new developers build large-scale housing complexes (several multi-storey apartment buildings at the same time), which they sell at rates unaffordable to rural migrants. The apartments are instead purchased by impoverished members of the middle classes for whom the more traditional and formal neighbourhoods of the city have become unaffordable.

Another factor that limits participation in the process of housing production is heightened police control in informal settlements that prevents most homeowners and/or tenants from adapting their dwellings to their growing needs or financial capacities by adding an extra floor (to their building) or room (to their apartment), as they had traditionally done.25 Numerous stories collected in the neighbourhoods describe altercations with police forces which often arrive with the first appearance of additional constructions and demolish the additional room, wall, parapet, etc. Sometimes it is a small enclosure or an opening to create cross-ventilation which is subject to this repressive reaction. In the eastern suburbs, where additional constructions are also equated with the spread of an undesirable (Shiite) population, the municipal police monitor nearby sales of construction materials, banning suppliers from selling such materials to the Z’aytriyyeh and Rouwaysat dwellers. Everything still has its price, is what they are told, but the prices have become prohibitive to the majority of dwellers. In many ways, it is the very meaning of what historically constituted a house in an informal settlement which is being challenged, as it is the ability to engage in home-based enterprises and/or to rearrange the building according to one’s needs which is being put in question (Turner, 1972).

The Management of the Neighbourhoods

Population increases and changing populations have also made it harder for neighbourhood committees to represent neighbourhood dwellers and/or manage service provision in these settlements. As a result, the tasks of servicing and representing the community have fallen back on public authorities and on the (Shiite) political parties. Looking first at urban services, it is

25. Dwellers tend to rely on the rental market in order to complement their meagre incomes. By adding a room or several rooms to one’s apartment and/or building, it is possible to earn good rents.
possible to detect a common discourse among both dwellers and planning agencies during the post-war era delegating the responsibility for servicing these neighbourhoods to (local) municipal authorities. This is in a context where no national plan addresses informal settlements and where, as described above, international organizations have aggressively promoted administrative decentralization. However, since all three neighbourhoods fall within the jurisdiction of municipalities whose populations are considered ‘undesirable’ on a religious and class basis and where these dwellers have no voting powers, local authorities are far from addressing their dwellers as partners in the making of the city. To the contrary, mayors rely on pejorative epithets when they describe these neighbourhoods, for example, as ‘seas of illegal migrants’ who will be ‘here for the coming decades’ or complain that ‘nothing will move them’, to quote only a few of the derogatory comments we heard in the course of interviews.26

Furthermore, when pressed by health and environmental concerns, mayors expressed frustration at their poor budgets and their inability to address the scale of the problems they faced in these settlements. In that context, it is not surprising that political parties, most notably Hezbollah, have taken charge of service provision either by directly ensuring these needs or by negotiating with public authorities for their provision (Fawaz, 2005; Harb and Leenders, 2005).

Similarly, representation has shifted in the post-war era towards the two main Shiite political parties (Amal and Hezbollah) who have established themselves as mediators between public agencies and the Shiite community, a role which is equally ascribed to the party by dwellers and public authorities. The public authorities readily declare themselves unable to control the problems associated with post-war urbanization and rely on these parties in order to ‘contain’ the problems that emerge from informal settlements, such as protests reclaiming some level of services. Planning agencies have also accepted Amal and Hezbollah as community representatives and they negotiate directly with these parties about population displacements and compensations, when these are required for the implementation of large-scale infrastructure and development projects that form the backbone of the entrepreneurial city that we are told Beirut will become.27

Over time, Hezbollah has come to monopolize all relations between the three informal settlements and public authorities, establishing itself as the

26. These quotes are taken from two interviews with the mayors of Fanar about Z’aytriyeh (August, 2007) and Choueiyat about Hayy el-Sellom (January–June, 2003).
27. Since 1990, several informal settlements have been hit by highway developments, while others (such as Hayy el-Sellom) have been threatened by such un-implemented developments for decades (Deboulet et al., 2005). In Rouwaysat, rumour says that the neighbourhood has become desirable for high-end housing development since the closure of the nearby quarries and that its dwellers will soon be displaced. In the absence of public channels of information, people learn about these projects through informal networks where news is often misstated and exaggerated.
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only acceptable authority on the ground. In the predominantly Christian eastern suburbs of Beirut, upon the return of war-displaced populations, Hezbollah appointed the local mosque’s Cheikh in Z’aytriyyeh as its regional representative and as the overseer of the neighbourhood’s relations with its surroundings. Since then, the Cheikh has negotiated several agreements with the Municipalities that led to the provision of some level of services, such as street lighting and asphalting. The Cheikh has also initiated several attempts to build formal relations with the Municipality that could lead to the legalization of the neighbourhood, to dwellers paying taxes in exchange for particular services, etc. Hezbollah also attempts to maintain control over the relation between these neighbourhoods and their surroundings, or the public at large. In all three areas, we were stopped by Hezbollah representatives during the interviews and asked to refer to local party representatives and get clearances from the party offices before going on with our fieldwork. In sum, the entire legislation of these neighbourhoods in terms of their relation to the rest of the city is increasingly controlled by Hezbollah. This observation is, however, to be qualified: the party’s control stops where traditional/family relations emerge, and does not intervene in boundary disputes, inter-family tensions, etc. Control is also not absolute: when unsatisfactory deals are struck between public agencies and the political parties, dwellers sometimes still protest or fail to abide by the agreement.

Yet, a qualitative shift has happened at the level of neighbourhood organizations whereby these have ceased to function outside cases of high emergency and the general organization of public affairs has been delegated to Hezbollah. This is evident in the discourse of dwellers who now commonly state that local neighbourhood associations are not needed anymore, since their tasks have been relegated to the parties’ representatives. Before closing this section, it is worth remembering that Hezbollah represents only sections of the community, meaning the majority of the Shiite dwellers who abide by its politics. Others, such as migrant workers, but also Christians and (Shiite or not) Muslims who oppose its policies, have not only lost representation but also leverage and position in any negotiations with the state and have no venues to challenge the consolidated authority of the party.

Re-assessing Informal Settlements as ‘Right to the City’

The implications of these post-war changes on urban production and neighbourhood management indicate that dwellers have undeniably lost much of their capacity to control these processes. This loss of control has, in turn, had several negative implications for the quality of life in the three neighbourhoods. First, the possibility to own a house in the city has been precluded for rural migrants who are cornered in precarious rental options, often in undesirable conditions. Interviews with recent migrants reveal that the prospect of home ownership is not within the realm of possibilities. In the words of
one interviewee, a middle-aged mother of four who was struggling to make ends meet and pay her rents regularly: ‘our parents didn’t establish an urban basis for us when it was still possible to do it; today we cannot dream of this possibility’. 28 Instead, new migrants have developed weak ties in the neighbourhoods where they dwell and most retain a solid connection with rural areas that provide a back-up option with every lay-off or health crisis. Of the thirty Lebanese tenant households we interviewed in Rouwaysat and Z’aytriyyeh during August and September 2007, virtually every family had opted at least once to send back the mother and children to the village for periods of months or years, depending on the conditions, in order to secure shelter since rental had become unaffordable in the city.

Second, all thirty households complained about their precarious tenancy which is the result of their inability to pay rents regularly, the landlords’ decision to evict them, 29 or the execution of public projects. Tenants also agreed that they have little recourse when the threat of eviction materializes, since landlords have the upper hand in housing provision (although narratives indicate that the latter may still be vulnerable to social pressure when the families are able to appeal to social connections). They also acknowledged that in the event of forced displacement for a public project, their only recourse was political parties.

Third, dwellers repeatedly complained about the poor living conditions in their neighbourhoods. This can be explained by the pressure from below generated by single male migrants who, perceiving their stay as temporary, are willing to settle for poorer housing conditions. Furthermore, higher population densities have generated extra pressure on services (water and electricity) and hence more frequent outages. Poorer conditions are also evidenced in a loss of privacy, which is severely felt when Lebanese families are forced to co-habitate with groups of single male workers. Their hostility vis-à-vis the settlement of (foreign) migrants in their residential areas, as well as the tensions that oppose religious communities (Christian and Muslim) in the eastern suburbs, sometimes translate into physical violence and contribute to lowering the quality of life in these neighbourhoods.

Poor quality of housing and precarious tenancy are, in turn, reflected in the multiple displacements that each household described over the relatively short period of time in which they had been in/out of the neighbourhood. In a period of ten to twelve years, households had typically moved four or five times (because landlords had opted to take back the property, because they were unable to afford the rent, or because they themselves couldn’t tolerate the conditions in which they were forced to live, such as poor

29. There are several reasons for landlords to reclaim their property such as one of the children getting married, opportunities for more profitable rents, or even the potential implementation of a projected highway that gives them incentives to reclaim their property in order to avoid sharing displacement compensation with tenants.
lighting, poor services, etc.). In short, what was once a project of city making has turned into a difficult and precarious inscription and the once well-ventilated and sunny neighbourhoods of the far suburbs of Beirut have deteriorated today into high-density, poor quality spaces where many dwellers who had historically participated in the making of the area dream today of leaving it.

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted in this article to depict ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theordore, 2002) or neoliberalism as it has actualized in Lebanon. This is a country where a history of so-called liberal or market-led policy making has characterized public involvement in the provision of social services — or lack thereof — and where sectarian social/geographic cleavages have marked its modern history. Neoliberalism has materialized in Beirut’s informal settlements in relation to the ability of these neighbourhoods to act as spaces in which low-income urban dwellers can exercise their ‘right to the city’, translated in both its appropriation and participation dimensions.

My main findings confirm the hypothesis that, without idealizing the past, the three informal settlements in Beirut selected as case studies were historically places where newcomers to the city participated in the production of their dwellings and, more generally, their neighbourhoods. The findings also indicate that the repercussions of high land prices, heightened police control, the delegation of social services to local and/or non-state actors (especially political parties), the proliferation of development/entrepreneurial projects, and the arrival of new population groups (impoverished middle classes and international migrant workers) to these areas have all converged to reduce the capacity of low-income dwellers to participate in the physical production of their neighbourhoods and the organization and management of their services. Given the similar ways in which informal settlements have operated in other lower income countries (Ward, 1982) and the widespread adoption of neoliberal policy making around the world, I would expect that my observations in Lebanon would be easily corroborated in other contexts.

Lefebvre argued that the production of space not only manifests various forms of injustice but also produces and reproduces them, thereby maintaining established relations of domination and oppression (Dikeç, 2001, 2002; Lefebvre, 1974). In this context, the inability of low-income urban dwellers to participate in the production of space not only reflects the rising patterns of social injustice but also predicts that the way neoliberalism is re-shaping spaces will in turn exacerbate injustices. It is perhaps in how the ‘right to the city’ brings forth a political programme to re-conceptualize the production of space along more inclusive and less capital intensive lines that it becomes
important to activate this concept in the evaluation of the role of informal settlements in cities where the influence of neoliberalism is currently felt. While some discussion of how neoliberalism influences public discourse and claims has already been initiated (Harloe, 2001), what is needed at this historical juncture is a shift of the critique of neoliberalism away from the state and public policy making as the main site of political struggle to be democratized (McCann 2003). Rather, we need — as informal settlers did in the 1950s and 1960s — to imagine new ways in which such politics can happen in and around space, testing the possibilities of forging new forms of spatial production that can provide the grounds for reclaiming the city. In other words, it is important to look for spaces and forms in which the ‘right to the city’ can still be enacted, since these could constitute places from which an alternative agenda to neoliberalism of ‘place making’ might be formulated. The answers are still to come.

REFERENCES


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