

## Beyond sectarianism. Hegemony, reproduction and resilience in Lebanon

Salloukh B. F, Barakat R., Al-Habbal J. S., Khattab L. W, Mikaelian S. (2015), *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*. PLUTO Press (240 pages \$30.00 ISBN: 9780745334134).

Kingston, P. W. (2013). *Reproducing sectarianism: Advocacy networks and the politics of civil society in postwar Lebanon*. SUNY Press (352 pages \$90.00 ISBN: 9781438447117).

Cammett, M. (2014). *Compassionate communalism: welfare and sectarianism in Lebanon*. Cornell University Press (336 pages \$27.95 ISBN: 9780801478932).

The Arab uprisings have not affected Lebanon directly. In the first months of 2011 Lebanon faced a new political crisis apparently aloof from what was happening in the rest of the region. After Hizbullah's members resigned from Saad Hariri-led government in protest against the Special Tribunal for Lebanon charged to investigate for Rafiq Hariri's assassination, the country witnessed the formation of a new government led by the Sunni Nagib Mikati and dominated by Hizbullah. If at the political level the attention was focused on the new government, on the streets of the country many ordinary Lebanese were not insensitive to the regional turmoil and echoing the Arab uprisings' slogans claiming, *al-sha'ab yurid isqat an-nidham al-taifi* (*the people want the fall of the sectarian regime*). The issue of sectarianism and the abolition of the sectarian system, namely the partition of political positions and public offices among to the main Lebanese communities (Christians-Maronites, Muslim-Sunnis and Shiites) according to sectarian criteria, have been central in Lebanon. Starting with the early studies on fragmented societies in the 1970s (Lijphart 1969) and until the most recent ones (Di Peri 2012), the division of the country along sectarian lines and the effects it has produced on the country's political system informed a vibrant and broad debate among the supporters of this system (Messarra, 1983) and its detractors (Jabbra e Jabbra 2001). But, mostly, this debate has been at the heart of Lebanese political life for many years: if the Lebanese constitution of 1926, the National Pact of 1943 and the Taif agreement of 1989 called for the abolition of the confessional system, Lebanese political events and actors have shown a total inability/impossibility to change it.

If, at first, sectarianism in Lebanon was strongly connected with the nature of its consociational political system (a model of democracy protecting the role of minorities by giving them a veto power), from the end of the 1990s the sectarian issue has become part, especially in the academic debate, of a sectarian reading of the whole of Middle East politics. The sectarian lens, in its specific declination of the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites, has become prominent in academic analyses largely due to the publication of Vali Nasr's book 'The Shia Revival' in 2007. Lebanon too was involved in the debate to the extent that the Sunni-Shiites divide became more relevant after Hizbullah's participation in Lebanese political institutional life in the 1990s and the creation, after Rafiq Hariri assassination in 2005, of the opposing coalitions of 8 and 14 March led respectively by the Shia Hizbullah and the Sunni *al-mustaqbal* parties. This sectarian reading of the Lebanese politics turned even more pronounced after the breakout of the Syrian civil war in 2011, when the massive influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, mainly Sunnis, exacerbated the sectarian fractures nourishing the narrative of the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites who have conflicting positions on the Syrian conflict.

The transition from a passive communitarianism to an active sectarianism is not just a semantic shift but it has had a relevant impact on the (re)production of the political discourse and its diffusion. According to this reading of the regional balance of power, studies on Lebanon in the post-uprisings era focus mainly on the sectarian element underlining how and to what extent Lebanese politics has been greatly affected by this phenomenon, especially linking the rise of sectarian claims with the influx of Syrian refugees or focusing on the role of crucial actors such as Hizbullah in this scenario.

In contrast to the sectarian reading of regional events mentioned above, the three books under review move, instead, on a different track. Rather, sectarianism is understood as a system of power characterized by strong patriarchal elements; a pervasive and structuring identity marker. Sectarianism is the pillar of Lebanese society able to reproduce, adapt and renew itself. As other systems of rules and values, sectarianism is resilient; it changes form but does not change its substance, aptly adapting to changing domestic and international conditions. Interestingly, the analogy between this reading of the sectarian phenomenon and the literature on the authoritarian resilience, scarcely used to analyse the Lebanese case, seems to emerge: sectarianism contributes to maintaining stable 'networks of privileges' (Heydemann 2004), which are the basis of the reproduction of the balance of power in neo-patrimonial systems.

The empirical solidity of the research carried out in the three books examined fills a gap in the analysis of post uprisings' Lebanon. From their cross-reading, a non-essentialist interpretation emerges: sectarianism is a changing subject/object, strongly rooted into Lebanese identities, a producer, echoing Gramsci, of ideological, social and economic hegemony fuelled, over the years, by neoliberal policies, that increase social inequalities.

### **Sectarianism as a practice of governance**

In 'The politics of sectarianism in postwar Lebanon', Bassel Salloukh and his colleagues analyse sectarianism from a Foucauldian perspective. The starting point is that sectarianism in Lebanon cannot be abstracted from the context in which it operates, whether national or regional. Accordingly, Salloukh and his colleagues argue that, after the end of the civil war (1975-1989), sectarianism in Lebanon was closely linked to economic elites 'placing the State's fiscal policies at the service of their class interests (p.2)'. The weakness of the Lebanese state and the sectarian system's ability to appropriate the class claims, nullifying them, have allowed the sectarian system to exploit the Lebanese state as a tool for its perpetuation and consolidation, blocking the surfacing of trans-sectarian or non-sectarian movements. Besides these negative domestic impacts, this policy, according to the authors, also leaves the country open to the external influences, making the 'State system' easily manipulated and outflanked.

As a consequence, sectarianism has to be analyzed in historical perspective. The authors adopt a post-culturalist reading of sectarianism 'rejecting ahistorical cultural explanations of Lebanese politics and the durability of sectarian identities (p.3)'. The core argument of the book is that sectarianism is a modern socio-economic and political power that 'produces and reproduces sectarian subjects and modes of political subjectification and mobilization through a dispersed ensemble of institutional, clientelist and discursive practice (p.3)'. This argument is developed through a comprehensive and detailed examination of the practices and strategies that sectarianism

as a form of socio-economic and political power in Lebanon has established over the years. After an historical reconstruction of the birth and development of sectarian institutions, the authors focus on some specific practices through which sectarianism thus defined develops its sprawling network of power able to perpetuate a continuous state of domination and subjectification of the individuals. Sectarianism's hegemony manifests itself through different channels and the creation of 'docile sectarian subjects' able to incorporate the sectarian ideology, reproducing and propagating it in society. Through this pervasive and encompassing system the sectarian elites control both the levers of political power and those of the economic system. In a broader sense they control the entire society.

The book is structured around three main themes that look at the reproduction and perpetuation of sectarianism in its institutional, clientelist and discursive practices. The sectarian system reproduces itself penetrating State institutions by placing for example family law under the control of sectarian courts (Chapter 3), or acting at a legislative level through the enactment of a series of laws and bureaucratic practices that contribute to fragment, besiege and co-opt civil society actors (Chapter 4). From a similar perspective, in Chapter 5, the role of the sectarian system in dampening the workers' voice is seen through the analysis of the process of co-optation and silencing of trade unions, traditionally very active actors in Lebanon. Chapter 6 focuses on the gerrymandering of electoral districts, a very delicate and crucial question for the Lebanese consociational system. The design of electoral districts which varies according the various electoral laws, contributes to create a situation of domination and subjectification of the population that, according to the authors, has prevented the development of trans-confessional claims. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 focus on the study of some key players in contemporary Lebanon and on the effects of the reproduction of the sectarian system of power on their discursive practices: the army, the visual media complex and Hizbullah.

### **Sectarianism as a 'dispersed domination' system**

Paul Kingston's volume also looks at the 'hegemonic resilience of sectarian political practices' (p.1) through the analysis of three advocacy networks in the field of gender, environment and disability. It employs though a different theoretical framework from the one that Salloukh and his colleagues put forth. According to Kingston, the influence of these actors has failed to foster the reform of the consociational system, despite their activism and their transversal and widespread diffusion. In his attempt to explain why such failure occurred, Kingston engages with three distinct conceptual frameworks. A first framework is that of the historical institutionalism. According to Kingston the Lebanese sectarian democracy model produces circuits of path-dependence that create powerful obstacles to change, especially for civil society.

Kingston suggests a second theoretical framework within which he places his argument, namely that civil society is a precondition for democratic development. In promoting this 'classic' reasoning, Kingston comes to some original arguments and to some extent very close to those of Salloukh and colleagues when he says that 'certain actors within Lebanon's civil society are not only privileged by the sectarian social and political order within which they exist but also work to reproduce it over time (p. 3)'. Where traditional notions of civil society argue that it is a counterweight to the State and capable of generating a virtuous processes towards democracy, Kingston's analysis suggests that the forces of Lebanese civil society have worked to maintain the sectarian system rather than abolish it. This happens, according to the author, both for the intrinsic

conditions of the State (for example, as in the case of Lebanon, its weakness and fragmentation) and the skills that actors of civil society display, in such systems, in taking advantage of their formal and informal networks. This allows them to have a privileged access to the State, its resources and its power.

A third frame Kingston engages with is that of the policy networks. In his reading of this theoretical framework the author tries to connect all the previous arguments by providing empirics. The innovative element in using this frame is his attempt to look at the 'associative networks', namely structures including members chosen and co-opted by the elite and members of civil society that escape from the 'sectarian hegemony' and therefore able to act as a counter-hegemonic power. This is the lens Kingston chooses to read the evolution and the dynamics of Lebanese associations in the fields of gender, environment and disability.

If in Chapters 2 and 3 Kingston reconstructs Lebanese political history and the development of its civic space through path-dependence, from Chapter 4 onwards the case studies are illustrated. One of the most interesting elements arising from the discussion of the associative networks is the way in which these networks have carved out areas of action in the system of Lebanese sectarian democracy. If the sectarian system is pervasive and the patronage logics strong and resilient, the weakness of the State system prevents a total domination and control of it, leaving some space for what Kingston calls a 'dispersed domination system'. This allows for glimmers of agency, often innovative and unexpected. Kingston's intuition of the existence of this 'dispersed domination system' at the heart of Lebanese originality is undoubtedly the added value of the Kingston investigation.

### **Sectarianism as a hegemonic discourse**

Melani Cammett's 'Compassionate communalism. Welfare and sectarianism in Lebanon' completes the picture of the workings of Lebanese sectarianism. Cammett moves into a post-culturalist and contingentist vision of sectarianism to the extent that she states 'I view sectarianism as a fundamentally political phenomenon rather than as the expression of essential cultural differences (p. 11)' adding a new dimension to the study of identity politics 'by focusing on how sectarian groups establish and reinforce their control over every day social and political life (p.7)'.

The case study that Cammett uses is that of Lebanese parties' welfare provision, comparing this case with similar cases in Iraq and India. Despite having bases and arguments similar to those advanced by Kingston and Salloukh and his colleagues ('the provision of social services both constitutes and reproduces the politics of sectarianism – p. 8'), Cammett, refers to a different theoretical framework, both as regards to the literature examined and the methods she uses to study the welfare provision. If welfare provision in Lebanon highlights how sectarianism works 'on the ground' and 'how service provision is used not only to address pressing social needs but also to build political support (p. 4)', Cammett goes beyond this argument looking at how and the extent to which welfare provision is bestowed according to sectarian or trans-sectarian logics. In Lebanon, where the state is weak and non-state organizations offer alternative services to the State, he poses the questions whether this offer of alternatives services follows sectarian logics?

It is around this main question that Cammett build the analysis. According to her there are two elements that influence Lebanese political parties' welfare provision: '(1) whether the party engages in a "state-centric" or "extra-state" political strategy and (2) whether it faces competition from other parties claiming to represent the same community - intrasect competition – (p. 3)'. The hypothesis is that the more the parties pursue a state-centric strategy, using formal and institutional channels, the more they tend to offer trans-sectarian welfare services in contrast to those parties who pursue an extra-state logic that tend, instead, to offer intra-sectarian services. Cammett argues that, both sectarianism and service provision create the condition for inclusion or exclusion of groups and 'illuminates the political geography of sectarianism (p.217)'. At the same time the research reveals the more intimate logics of clientelism among groups. The hypothesis is tested on a detailed analysis of six Lebanese parties that historically distribute social services (the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, Kataeb and Lebanese Forces; the Shi'a Muslim Amal Movement and Hizbullah; the Sunni Muslim Future Movement).

The research methodological structure is robust and sophisticated. Cammett draws up a matrix with a set of indicators, which then she applies, to the six Lebanese parties. This matrix has been enriched by a collection of empirical data, interviews and archival work. The originality of the research and the applied methodology will pave the way for quantitative analysis also in the context of Middle Eastern Studies, an often ghettoized discipline where these techniques have so far been under-estimated (Pellicer et al. 2015).

### **Is the study of sectarianism in Lebanon a lost cause?**

In 2011 Mastropaolo provocatively titled his book 'Is Democracy a lost cause?' and reflected on the paradoxes and virtues of an imperfect invention. Paraphrasing his title we may ask if the study of sectarianism in Lebanon is a lost cause to the extent that it represents an invincible 'leviathan' designed to last for centuries. The cross-reading of the three books presented here underlines, from different empirical perspectives and with various analytical lenses, how in post 2011 Lebanon, sectarianism has been reinforced and to what extent this fortification is, in some way, challenging politics and society. Some pessimism pervades the outlook of Lebanese politics even if the authors of the books outline the achievements and progress Lebanon made over the years when it comes to building trans-sectarian or non-sectarian identities. At the moment, however, the efforts are not sufficient to dismantle a hegemonic and pervasive system of power.

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