al-Nizam: Lebanon as a necrocapitalist state

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Abstract

This article considers "necrocapitalism" as an analytic rubric and social system that governs Lebanon in its "post-War". I deploy the term "necrocapitalism" because the lives, deaths and psychic suffering of the population are either political and economic assets to be protected and cultivated (through sectarianism and clientelism) or, at worst, collateral cost, where life, physical well-being and psychic suffering are casually overlooked. Therefore, this article considers the political economy of sectarianism, kleptocracy, neoliberalism, and state capture within a series of ideological-affective mechanisms that bind elites to subordinates and the state to both. In thinking through what might characterize necrocapitalism in contrast to other forms of capitalism, this descriptive and analytic exordium considers Lebanese governmentality (a combination of sectarianism as a social system and the neoliberal-kleptocratic state) as a nizam, a system of governance, of social relations, and of psychic violence. Al-nizam is not only as the state and a particular ruling regime, but also a complex assemblage of social, political and economic relations, infrastructures and institutions of the state that the ruling class both captures, populates, exploits and undermines in a comprehensive social and political project to extract as much of Lebanon's surplus capital as possible from the country regardless of the lives of those in it.

Keywords: Lebanon, Capitalism, Necropolitics, necrocapitalism, Lauren Berlant, Mehdi Amil

Necrocapitalism: Making the argument

The cataclysmic explosion on 4 August 2020 that killed more than 200 people and wounded at least 7 000 was caused by a venal sectarian oligarchy that reorganised and solidified its hegemony during the Lebanese Civil War and further entrenched itself thereafter. The explosion of 4 August was no "glitch" in the neoliberal state, no bug, nor a hiccup, but rather an event that offers, in Laurent Berlant's words, "the revelation

of an infrastructural failure" (2016, p. 393). Lebanon has never been a neoliberal state. Lebanon has been a *necrocapitalist* state. This article is a prolegomenon to thinking about necrocapitalism as an analytic rubric that considers the political economy of sectarianism, kleptocracy and state capture within a series of ideological-affective mechanisms that bind elites to subordinates and the state to both. As a Lebanese Arab who has been involved in anti-capitalist movements for decades, I am struck by the repetitive thought how this cataclysm might be different that the "slow death" of Lebanese society since the end of the "Civil War." Undoubtedly, the explosion on 4 August—the largest man-made, non-nuclear explosion in history (and I do intentionally gender the explosion)— "created a whole city of trauma victims, shell-shocked by the same singular cataclysmic event", to quote a relative in Beirut. It is the emotionally powerful and physically devastating impact of this latest "crisis" (that accelerated the latest-current economic crisis) that compels me to interrogate this "glitch", not as a break in a "fragile" system that struggles for normalcy and success, but as a *state of affairs*. It is a symptom of the state (*halah* and *dawlah*), but not a Gramscian morbid symptom, a symptom that awaits a cure. Rather, the explosion is a symptom of the *structure* of the ruling regime of Lebanon, known as *al-nizam* (al-nizham, النظام), and only an opportunity to recreate Lebanon in the image of its ruling elite.

If, as Berlant (2016, p. 395) has critiqued, "social theory usually derives its urgency and its reparative imaginary from spaces of catastrophe and risk where the exemplum represents structural failure", I am offering necrocapitalism in this article as perhaps an analytic concept more fitting to describe Lebanon in its "post-War" era. In this article, I am not offering a deep geography of political economy of "Lebanese Capitalism", as Salim Nasr (1979) names it. I am offering, instead, an initial description of what necrocapitalism is in Lebanon. This descriptive exordium considers *al-nizam* not only as the state and a particular ruling regime, but also as something more. The nizam is a "system," a complex assemblage of social, political and economic relations, infrastructures and institutions of the state that the ruling class both captures, populates, exploits and undermines in a comprehensive social and political project to extract as much of Lebanon's surplus capital as possible from the country.

I call this "necrocapitalism" because the lives, deaths and psychic suffering of the population are either political and economic assets to be protected and cultivated (through sectarianism and clientelism) or, at worst, collateral cost, where life, physical well-being and psychic suffering are casually overlooked. Yet through the necrocapitalism analytic, I am also suggesting something additional in the hopes of further exploration, a way to consider how the psychic violence of the Lebanese political and social order is perpetuated. Therefore, in thinking about the structure of *al-nizam* as the ruling elite, the state and more, I hope to centre ideology as the operative lubricant that mitigates the frictions that arise from contradictions of necrocapitalism. At the same time, however, I consider the affective power of ideology and the durable identitarian attachments as the essential glue that binds subjects to ruling elites. In so doing, Stuart Hall – along with Lauren Berlant – teach us that considering ideology, its reliance on

consent and its affective power allows us to avoid the "structural determinacy" of reductionist economic analysis (Hall, 1986, p. 31).

Structure, in this case, is not static or calcified but, following Berlant, is "that which organizes transformation", while ''infrastructure'', like the port itself, comprises not only edifices, the machines and networks of labour and distribution, but also the social relations that saturate them. For Berlant, infrastructure is "that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself" (2016, p. 394). My reliance on Berlant is not coincidental. They have taught us to consider how affect and attachments are expressions and components of political economy and ideology and how state and discursive "infrastructure", which are "the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace" (2011, p. 5), not as an aberration of the neoliberal system but as its very condition. But also, in thinking about crisis, Berlant offers us a portrait of the "fraying" of "fantasies of good life" promised by liberal capitalist society since 1990, "when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life" (2011, p. 3). But what of the "landfill" of ordinary life in the Global South, where the desire and goal of "liberal capitalist society" is neoliberalism's blunt instrument wielded by the European Union, the United States of America and the World Bank to prop up "the free-market business practices and good governance, in liberal economies, principles that [ruling families like] the Mikati family defends" (from Prime Minister Najib Mikati's Official Statement regarding the Pandora Papers, as quoted in Chehayeb, 2021). The consecutive and perpetual series of economic and social crises in Lebanon, one "glitch" after another, has been the means by which the ruling class, with the support and funding of the international community, continues to extend itself and deepen its control of all levers of the state and economy, over the lives and deaths of the country's population, and thus blur its power with state sovereignty.

This question of sovereignty is not intended to be a nationalist call for a "liberal democratic society" that includes citizens and excludes non-citizens. Rather, the question of sovereignty causes us to think about the nature of the state's authority over its subjects. The preponderance of analysis, by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, gauge Lebanon as "fragile", "weak", "non-existent" or "failed" (Hazbun, 2016; Hermez, 2005; Marshall, 2012; Mouawad & Baumann, 2017). Despite the concerns of the Council on Foreign Relations, whether Lebanon is a failed state is secondary (Robinson, 2020). It is our international relations "models" and political theories—despite their consideration of political economy, sectarianism, clientelism, neoliberalism, sovereignty and geopolitics—that are failed because, if the Lebanese state is a failed state, it is because it operates as it has been designed.

When I say that Lebanon is not a failed state but rather that our analysis has failed, I am not casting aspersions on the generations of Lebanese Arab intellectuals and militants who have struggled with the characteristics of "Lebanese capitalism", theories of how sectarianism and class rule are interwoven into it and the role of domination of surplus

value generated by the state and the population (through banking, imports, private services, state services, etc.) (‘Amil 1978; ‘Amil, 1989; Nasr, 1978; Traboulsi, 2011). On the contrary, we remain their students. For example, to name the ways in which state, economic and social structures and infrastructure work within the context of Lebanon, Mahdi ‘Amil, especially, thinks through how the “universal” (*kawniyah*) structural logics and processes of capitalism work within the particularities (*khususiyah*) of sectarian and colonial conditions of Lebanon (‘Amil, 1978**;** Frangie, 2012). In this regard, I am trying to consider how *al-kawniyah* and *al-khususiyah* within Lebanon, especially over the past thirty years, wire the biopolitical to the economic to the social within the context of a state, whose one function is the perpetuation of a particular social-economic order. This order, I am naming “necrocapitalism” because the functions of the state are riveted to the hegemonic control of the sectarian ruling elites who control state sovereignty – to borrow from Achille Mbembe – in their managing of the conditions of life and mortality in a formula to maximise capital extraction for the ruling class (Mbembe, 2003; 2019).

Necrocapitalism, therefore, describes the structures and infrastructure of the state-ruling class-sectarian-nexus, the architecture of Lebanon, its state, its population and its ruling class bound through sectarian social relations, biopolitical forms of micro (sectarian) and macro (state) governance and its perennial capitalist ideological scaffolding. Necrocapitalism is not used to distinguish itself from other kleptocratic, oligarchical systems of state capture. Indeed, these economic-political structures are at play within necrocapitalism, even as the term seeks to conceptualise Mbembe’s necropolitics not only as a form of negligence or disregard. Rather, necrocapitalism is a purposeful, albeit mobile and allusive, *design* of neoliberal capitalist governmentality that relies on ideological formations, biopolitics and social relations within sectarianisms and nationalism to expedite unabashed class rule within governmental and non-governmental structures and infrastructure. In other words, necrocapitalism is a nizam, a system it not only capitalizes on the social relations of sectarianism (social relations with and between communities and their access to prestige, capital, power, resources, and power) but also the social relations between the ruling classes and the state itself. Within this multi-vector modes of social relations that structure governance, governmentality, and political economy, I am arguing that the necrocapitalist state functions specifically as a mechanism for the enrichment of the ruling class, which approaches the lives, well-being, death, surplus wealth and labour potential of their own sectarian constituency as latent, potential and manifest assets to facilitate extraction. At the same time, the state maintains its “independence” to reproduce the social forms, class and nationalist ideological formations and the biopolitics of citizenry necessary to maintain a semblance of social order, while the ruling class is in continual motion seeking to redistribute wealth—wealth that was extracted through the state and siphoned off to the ruling class—to its sectarian constituents by means of clientelism.

This clientelism relies on social relations within the sect but also the “weakness” of the state, not to permit the clientelist practices but so that the state remains a resource for

the ruling class itself. The state as a resource, not as a "weak state", permits the ruling class the only means to provide sectarian constituencies access to state resources, the affective and social bonds intertwining to justify class rule and sectarian allegiance. Even in the "good times", Melani Cammet (2014) has shown that access to services, employment, state benefits and even, at times, education are greatly facilitated by the sectarian patron–client relationship to their *za'im*, or leader. In other words, the ruling class has an interest in keeping the state alive and functioning only in that it can regulate and manipulate access to it. This is more than just a rentier state with clientelism, however. The Lebanese *nizam* is a necrocapitalist system not because it props up some amorphous ruling class that operates under the trappings of a neoliberal developing country. Rather, the necrocapitalist ruling class literally exploits government, its functions and its revenue stream as a mechanism to further the relevance of the sectarian patron–client system (Diwan & Haidar, 2019; Johnson, 1986). On the other hand, the ruling elite itself profits from the state by financing national development projects from banks owned by political leaders and rewarding lucrative contracts to companies connected with or owned by sectarian leaders and parties.

Necrocapitalism, then, runs through state capture but also captures biopolitical forms of "belonging" ("citizenship" and/or sectarian identity) through affective identifications produced through complex, historical social relations and processes. The question of ideology in this equation is not new. How do we consider the capitalist naturalisation in concert with the sociability of sectarianism and the economic hegemony of sectarian leaders within the sovereignty of a state? 'Amil (1978) famously considered the role of ideology in riveting together the bourgeois state and its apparatus to the *hegemony* of the ruling class while maintaining the two as discrete social formations. While the fusing of these two may be classical, it allows us to ponder how ideology productively binds competing positionalities of Lebanese identity: sectarianism, class, regionalism and nationalism.

Necrocapitalism and ideology

As a Lebanese Maronite Arab Zghartawi scholar, I am very personally and politically aware of the historical, class, sectarian and nationalist implications of thinking about *al-khususiyah* of Lebanon, particularities (e.g. "sectarianism", "tribalism") that also mobilise and find legibility in universalised, civilisational tropes that structure capitalist societies in the developing world. In defining what is specific to Lebanon, therefore, I want to be careful not to replicate "Lebanese exceptionalism", an inbuilt feature of parochial Lebanese national chauvinism and a common denominator in all sectarian subjectivities (Abu-Rish, 2020). In other words, Lebanese nationalism, from its inception, has been predicated on the presumption of Lebanese exceptionalism, as being *ghayr* (other than or different) from Arab states—as being an exception. In thinking about the "particularities" and the "universals" of the Lebanese condition, we must not undervalue Lebanese nationalist discourse as a part of its national ideology, as the intersection between the dominance of the bourgeoisie, hegemonic ideology, popular

conscriptions and the state (as ‘Amil, Frangie and, indeed, Nicos Poulantzas, highlight). Lebanese nationalism itself—the national racist hubris that cuts across all classes and sectarian communities in Lebanon—plays an operative ideological role in the workings of the necrocapitalist state and the hegemony of the ruling class as it provides the affective identification with the sovereign state (and its ruling elite) as somehow still better than other Arab states, even as the country falls apart around its population.Lebanese nationalist discourse that saturates all sectarian identities revolves around two unmovable pieces that differentiate Lebanon from its Arab siblings: Lebanon is a confessional country enriched by its differences between religious sects and it is primordially and almost genetically a laissez-faire, free-market country. Kais Firro (2003, 2004) has shown how Lebanese nationalists explicitly arose from anti-Arab chauvinism, beginning with thinkers such as Jouplain (Bulus Nujaym), Michel Chiha (the author of the Lebanese constitution, who could not speak Arabic), anti-Arab bigot Charles Corm and nationalist “liberal” Charles Malik. This ideological formation emerged from Christian exceptionalism, fostered by colonial mentors. But its motivation was clearly economic. While possibly introduced by the French to foster paternalistic ties with the Maronites, the Christian bourgeoisie eagerly developed the “idea of Lebanon” to secure their own sovereignty over the country as their property and patrimony (Hakim, 2013). After the Civil War, Lebanese nationalism was no longer a Christian phenomenon but a cross-sectarian means to rally sectarian communities around the neoliberal “reconstruction and development” project. Rafiq al-Hariri and a cross-sectarian coterie of new and old economic elites around him championed Lebanese exceptionalism and leveraged it between rival powers to elevate Lebanon’s importance and the importance of capital investment in their enterprises (Baumann, 2017). In de-exclusivising nationalism from Christianity, I am also stressing here the role of ideology as the glue within necrocapitalism that naturalises sectarian attachments (as affective identifications) with confessional ruling elites, even as perpetual social and economic crises should call these attachments and allegiances into question.

If Lebanese *khususiyat* are different from the petit-bourgeois military oligarchies and autocracies of Syria, Jordan or Egypt, it is only in that Lebanese economic elites did not have to make an alliance with the Lebanese political ruling class, state apparatus, a ruling party and/or the military because the Lebanese ruling political class is one and the same as the Lebanese ruling economic class. Therefore, my use of “necrocapitalism” in the context of Lebanon departs from that of Bobby Banerjee (2008, p. 1547), who understands it as a practice that operates through the establishment of colonial sovereignty and the manner in which this sovereignty is established in the current political economy where the business of death can take place through “states of exception”. More simply, he considers necrocapitalism as divergent from liberal capitalism in that, citing Achille Mbembe, it manages “general commerce with a sword in today’s global economy”, thereby creating “life worlds and death worlds in the contemporary political economy” (Banerjee, 2008, p. 1542).

Thinking about the unity of the ruling economic, political and social elites and considering how ideology functions complexly to manage the contradictions with the logic of the Lebanese state qua sectarian state, "necrocapitalism" in this article considers the structural, inbuilt and constitutive nature of a capitalist order that goes beyond "who is protected"—and the unprotected are not determined by who has guns (Mbembe, 2019, pp. 34-36). The monopoly on state violence in Lebanon is shared by militias and the state, which are functionally united or work in concert, and it seeks no moral or rational justification but a paternalistic dictate (Mbembe, 2019). In this way, the biopolitics of Lebanese necrocapitalism involves state and market violence but also a consensual allegiance to sectarian ruling classes and willful celebration of Lebanon as a "free market" state through ideological mechanisms and social relations that shore up affective attachments and communal identifications. Lebanon offers us a case-study example of necrocapitalism because the capitalist order does not do away with state structure nor is it an autocratic regime that uses the state to accrue wealth for an authoritarian rule or a single ruling family or political party. Rather, necrocapitalism is a system that enables all contradictions of capitalist ideology to run at full throttle, which includes the hegemony of the ruling class with the consent of the subordinate classes, yet without any check from the valence of a "liberal democratic state" or a "moral economy" that those subordinate classes might otherwise demand (Scott, 1976). Indeed, to think about these "demands", the demands and desires of the people and how these demands for security, health and welfare might also conflict with their desire and identifications with the sectarian ruling elites seems to be a central component of necrocapitalism. The assertion that this article essentially poses but cannot fully explore is that necrocapitalism conscripts Lebanese into a *nizam* that is built on the perpetuation of psychic violence against them.

What has become clear over the past several years, and what was crystalised in the explosion of 4 August and the subsequent comprehensive breakdown of the Lebanese economy, is that the necrocapitalist ruling class, despite the deep intersectarian antagonisms, are united in two shared political goals: The first goal is maintaining the sectarian system, sectarian constituencies, sectarian animosities and, indeed, geopolitical, regional rivalries, socially, politically and structurally. The second goal is to ensure an ineffectual, debilitated, subordinate state while, at the same time, maintaining the state and its functions partially as a tool for patron–client relations and partially to ensure its own security, political and economic infrastructure and relations. Simply put, these two shared goals of all sectarian ruling elites (that form one unified Lebanese ruling class) work to maintain the kleptocratic system that funnels as much surplus capital directly, unobstructed, out of Lebanese coffers and the hands of Lebanese citizens (and non-citizens), literally into the banks and bank accounts of the Lebanese ruling elites. These two are also definitive of necrocapitalism, where *al-nizam* is designed exclusively for the self-preservation and self-enrichment of the ruling class, even at the threat of mass death, suffering and impoverishment of the population.

The context of Lebanon is precisely what compels us to consider the multilayered role of *ideology*—the intersection between capitalist, identitarian and national ideologies—in the perpetuation and naturalisation of the incessant crisis in which the Lebanese have lived for decades. We mark with utmost clarity that, despite massive protests and the generally accepted fact that Lebanon's ruling elites are corrupt and self-serving, sectarianism has conscripted the Lebanese to support, indeed fight for, economic/political elites willingly. The perennial question within Lebanon has always been one of the *hegemony* of sectarian identity, allegiances and, therefore, the sectarian system—that translated into the consensual *domination* of sectarian elites—at the expense of the very basic functioning of a civil society and a functioning economy (Bardawil, 2020). The bickering of low-level sectarian functionaries formally attached to parties, journalists with unabashed allegiances and the bloated absurdities articulated on sectarian-twitter begs us to pursue interrogation of the affective power of sectarian social relations further and how they produce and obfuscate exploitative social relations, from gender to labour to sexuality to the environment (Mikdashi, 2014).

Rather than explore the ideological economic or political reasons for the sectarian system, I would like to consider how ideology is a constitutive part of this state-sectarian-capitalist equation and to discuss – as Gramsci (1971) teaches us in thinking about ideology – how consent is conscripted and how it reproduces and undergirds regimes of oppression, exploitation and extraction. Here is where affect, attachments and identification meet political economy, historical processes, social relations and governmentality. Rob Nixon's "slow violence" (2011), interwoven with Berlant's "slow death" (2007, 2011), elucidates how the current-crisis-as-perpetual-crisis in Lebanon is licensed by the neoliberal global capitalist order as expressed in Lebanese *khususiyat*. The invocation of Rob Nixon in the context of Lebanon is helpful because of the grotesque environmental degradation in Lebanon at the hands of the ruling elites during and since the end of the Civil War (Nasreddine, 2021b; Sarraf et al., 2010). But the environmental degradation is also illustrative of how the ruling class extracts domestic (through state revenue) and foreign (through aid and loans) capital from the Lebanese through the functions and legitimacy of the state.

Nixon's definition of "slow violence" offers insights into the system of necrocapitalism in Lebanon as a long-term *nizam* that has been a slow transfusion of the life, welfare, labour and capital of the Lebanese and its resources to the coffers of the ruling elites. Nixon (2011, p.10) notes that the slowness of violence is both temporal, biological and structural—"embodied by a neoliberal order of austerity measures, structural adjustment, rampant deregulation, corporate megamergers, and a widening gulf between rich and poor". But unlike Berlant's "slow death" in the shadow of "cruel optimism", Nixon avoids addressing how ideology structures the "natural" or seamless unfolding of slow violence, even as it is decried and its contradictions highlighted by writers, theorists, activists and militants. In other words, if we are not to be deterministic or reductive in considering Lebanon as a necrocapitalist state, the sectarian system must be seen not as only a "tool" of the ruling class but as ideologically constitutive of both

sectarian and national identity operating along social relations that also mobilise through particular identifications and attachments. The role of ideology, therefore, is not singular but affective, historically constituted, and melds contradictions to form compelling bonds of social identification (and social relations) between sectarian leaders and their constituencies, even in the face of the most materially glaring incongruities (Berlant, 2011).

What necrocapitalism looks like

For years, economist George Corm has noted that France and the United States of America have enabled the Lebanese ruling classes to govern Lebanon through a corrupt "bankocratic" (*bancocratic*) *nizam* (Corm, 1998, p. 1; de Miramon, 2021; Safieddine, 2019). Confirming Corm's reference to the bankocratic state, Hisham Safieddine's (2019) intricate history of Lebanon as a banking state locates Lebanese necrocapitalism as an outgrowth from the post-war era of neoliberal globalisation and systems of banking and finance in which the "reconstruction" project was central. The neoliberal reconstruction project in Lebanon has been well documented, where the reconstruction process was organised around the political programme of complete privatisation of all public services and assets, as well as appropriation of properties and lands through eminent domain and investment and development projects (encompassing utilities, garbage, telecommunications, transportation, fuel distribution, banking, and so on) (Abu Rish, 2014, 2016; Baumann, 2017; Becherer, 2005; Leenders, 2012; Monroe, 2016; Safieddine 2019; Sawalha 2010).

Rafiq al-Hariri, one of the richest men in Lebanon in the early 1990s, achieved his long-time aspiration of becoming Prime Minister in the 1990s. In that role, he started Solidere s.a.l., (*Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction du Centre-ville de Beyrouth*), a public-private joint-stock and holding company and real estate conglomerate responsible for rebuilding not only Beirut, but many parts of Lebanon. The *société à responsabilité limitée* (s.a.l. private company) Solidere worked hand in glove with governmental ministries directly through the governmental Council for Development and Reconstruction, initially started by President Elias Sarkis as a "Chehabist" statist project (Baumann, 2019, p. 64). The goal in "reconstructing" Lebanon was not to restore, modernise and provide services to a population of a war-torn country. Rather, it was to design a necrocapitalist state under classical liberal, "free-market" nationalist discourses. In this way, Lebanon's economic development and reconstruction programme, as spearheaded by Solidere, was an opportunity for the ruling class to a) consolidate its power over the state; b) transfer state and public wealth into the coffers of a small handful of ruling individuals and families; and c) in doing so, also expand and consolidate the network of the ruling class into new and old allies and clients within each respective sectarian community.

We will see that this economic history is the basis of Lebanon's debilitating debt, one of the largest in the world, which is owed not to international lenders but to banks owned

by the same political figures who lead the country and the sectarian parties. Yet, following Corm's flagging of the bankocratic *nizam* and the fact that sectarian leaders either own or have heavy investments in these banks, we remember Saskia Sassen's (2017) work that centers the material consequences (e.g., the exploitation of cheap labour or the degradation of the environment) of finance capital. In other words, we see the importance of recognizing the role of finance and investment capitalism as a fundamental part of the Lebanese state and the ways in which the ruling elites were able to extract wealth, property and capital from the Lebanese and the population within discourse that advocate for communal and national economic and political interests. (Diwan, 2020; Diwan & Haider, 2019; Harake & Abou Hamde, 2020; Safieddine, 2019).

In 2020, Lebanon was ranked the 39th most corrupt out of 180 countries in the world in 2020 (Corruption Rank).1 While income disparities have multiplied exponentially since 2016, the latest study on income inequality reports that 10 per cent of Lebanese own 70 per cent of Lebanon's total wealth and only 1 per cent owns close to 45 per cent, where "the poorest 50 percent were left with less than 5 percent" (Assoud, 2021, p. 8)**.** This confirms Fawaz Traboulsi's (2011, p.31) findings that "48 per cent of personal wealth in Lebanon belongs to just 0.3 per cent of the adult population – a mere 8,900 individuals". Among these, "just two families", the Mikati family (including Najib Mikati, the current Prime Minister) and the Hariri family (including Saad Hariri, who assumed the mantle to represent the Sunni Lebanese community politically after the assassination of his father) "own 15 per cent" of the country's wealth. This leaves the remaining 4 000 000 Lebanese citizens, 470 000 Palestinian refugees and 1000 000 Syrian refugees owning less than 52 per cent of Lebanon's wealth.

Here we see that when we identify Lebanon's necrocapitalism as a matter exclusively of systemic graft and unequal distribution of wealth, we overlook the systemic problem of sectarian oligarchical "state capture", as Hellman et al. (2000) coined it, or as the South Africans refer to it. It further highlights how necrocapitalism is more than corporatocracy and the agreements between states and business that override the interests of the population. Lebanon presents us with a clear operational view of necrocapitalism, where the state, its functions, the political elite and its civil society blur into the interests and domination of the ruling economic class. The state, its assets and its functions were not "taken over" or captured but, rather, Lebanon shows us, perhaps

1 See "Corruption Rank," in *Trading Economics*, Tradingeconomics.com The information is corroborated by Transparency International at https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl but also tracked by its Lebanese chapter, The Lebanese Transparency Association, found at https://transparency-lebanon.org Also, for income inequality, see the report, United Nations Development Programme and Ministry of Finance, Republic of Lebanon (2017), "Assessing Labor Income Inequity in Lebanon's Private Sector: Findings, Comparative Analysis of Determinants, and Recommendations" (UNDP).

in the most crudely Marxist way, that the state's *only function*, its sole purpose, is to serve the ruling elite and to mediate tensions between them.

The ruling class and necrocapitalism

The stories of corruption, graft, monopolies and bankocracy demonstrate that the term "the Lebanese ruling class" is not a Marxist idiom or rhetoric. Traboulsi (2011) succinctly and sharply provides statistics for the rise of a new post-war capitalist "businessman" ruling class, led by a series of new figures along the lines of old land and banking families, who successfully maintain monopolies on virtually all Lebanese imports and exports, as well as in the manufacturing, financial and banking sectors. Even conservative economic studies, whether by independent economists or the United Nations, agree that the 1 per cent that owns most of the private wealth also controls the public resources and institutions (Nahas, 2020). It bears repeating that a select group of political or politically connected families owns or controls significant portions of *all* of the banks (including the Central Bank), access to publicly and privately owned natural resources (including water), fuel-import and fuel distribution and the public and "informal" electrical grid (including a massive "informal" electrical grid composed of massive generators that are owned by a nation-wide "generator mafia") (Abu-Rish, 2014, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2020; Diwan, 2020; Safieddine, 2019). But more than only the economic elites controlling politicians and influencing state institutions (as the wealthy often do in all countries), this Lebanese 1 per cent also dominates, in fact, *exclusively* populates the political elite. Therefore, when we speak of a ruling class, it also bears repeating that it is because the political elite is the economic elite. They are one and the same group. Therefore, a few hundred people and a few dozen families make up the highest-ranking members of almost all sectarian parties.

As is well known, the "sectarian parties" are indistinguishable from their sectarian figureheads: Aoun and his *al-Tayyar al-watani al-hurr*, Walid Jumblatt and his *al-hizb al-Ishtiraki*, Nabih Berri and his *Amal*, Suleiman Frangieh and his *Marada*, Saad al-Hariri and his *al-Mustaqbal* and the Gemayels and their *al-Kataeb* party, modeled after the Nazi Party, like Antoine Saade's now irrelevant rightest Syrian Socialist National Party. Despite the prominence of al-Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah and war-criminal Samir Geagea, Hizbullah, the Lebanese Communist Party and the fascist Lebanese Forces are the only parties that have a political structure, organised not around personality but political ideology. That said, except for the LCP, allies of Hizbullah and the Lebanese Forces (if not their highest-ranking members) are intimately allied with the ruling class. In this way, necrocapitalism is the structural system of the Lebanese state and sectarianism is a structural element thereof. This is the necrocapitalist *nizam*.

Remembering Berlant, we understand the structural to include the fluidity of infrastructure and structures to move agilely and to use all ideological, fiscal, political and moral resources at their disposal to reproduce themselves and ensure longevity. This is most obviously expressed through sectarian politics in Lebanon, which should not be

seen, as in classical liberal theory, as a rival to the state but, rather, a constituent of it. It would be a mistake to assert that sectarianism or the state itself is a complete contrivance of the ruling class. With Berlant in mind, confessionalism's affective power—the communal bonds and identities they maintain—remains real, compelling and beyond the scope of this article (Deeb, 2011; Makdisi, 2000; Traboulsi, 2007; Weiss, 2010). Girded by this affective power and its socially and historically constructed nature, sectarianism, the sectarian structure of the state and sectarian politics are inevitably mechanisms and structures from the primary modus operandi of the ruling economic elite. Sectarianism maintains particular social relations within and between communities to ensure the exploitation of every state apparatus and asset. These assets include human assets, namely the Lebanese and non-citizen population, in its *predatory* programme to accumulate as much wealth – "legally" or illegally – as possible, with absolute disregard for human or environmental suffering.

While easily misunderstood as a series of reckless moves by an incompetent failed state or a consequence of sectarian bickering and manoeuvering rather than governance, this calamitous meltdown is the culmination of the "slow death" of Lebanese society over three decades. "Slow death", according to Berlant, "refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (Berlant, 2007, p. 754, 2011). Despite the currency of the phrase, we tend to forget their discussion emerges from David Harvey's thinking of "slow death" in the context of how capitalism defines "illness" as the inability to produce (i.e. work) for capitalism. Understanding this, one can think of necropolitical Lebanese as a mortification of an entire population. However, it would be a miscalculation to think of the Lebanese as an expendable non-population. Mortification is a *condition of life*, where conditions to exist became thinner and narrower but all made tolerable with the normalization of precarity as a structural quality of life. We only need to ask what they are producing and reproducing and how their very existence is wired to provide conditions of longevity, not for the state or the nation but the ruling class itself. This is where sectarianism comes in.

The political economy of Lebanese necrocapitalism

In March 2020, the Lebanese state defaulted on a US$1.2 billion Eurobond, signalling the imminent collapse of the Lebanese economy, the full background and complexities of which Joanne Chaker (2020) masterfully illustrates. Indeed, the previous year had been marked by massive, inspiring demonstrations that brought together Lebanese from across generations, regions and sects into a truly progressive movement that unambiguously called for the ejecting of the Lebanese political and economic order *tout court* along with vocally fronting issues of gender and sexuality, the abuse of foreign labourers and the question of Palestinian liberation (Bou Khater, 2021; Daher, 2019). The explosion on 4 August occurred against this backdrop, but also within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as in all countries, has had a catastrophic impact on the economy (Khoury et al., 2020) In Lebanon, the pandemic affected not only the well-

being of the Lebanese, but also foreign workers (especially women), hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees (who have been reeling since the USA defunded UNRWA) and the 1.5 million Syrian refugees in a country of only four million people. Against the pandemic, the explosion on 4 August was characteristic not only of the moment, nor only of the economic and social crisis in motion since 2014, but of the whole Lebanese necropolitical order. Lebanon's economy, which has been suffering in recent years, quite literally bottomed out in May, when the Lebanese lira lost 80% of its value, plunging over 50% of its population into poverty. Whereas before the explosion, poverty had been projected to reach up to 75% by the end of the year due to hyperinflation, mass unemployment and the absence of basic social services, the plight of Syrian refugees, migrant domestic workers and Palestinian refugees is expected to deteriorate even more exponentially, considering that they live outside of Lebanon's client-patron sectarian system but not outside of the Lebanese *nizam*.

Lebanon's debt has reached US$92 billion, between 160-190% of its GDP, depending on reports (Lebanon Economic Monitor, 2021). If Lebanese nationalists want to perseverate on their uniqueness, perhaps they should consider how Lebanon is *ghayr* in that most of this debt is internal debt to Lebanese banks, rather than the traditional usurious international lending sources such as the IMF and World Bank. This internal debt began to accumulate during the "reconstruction" in the 1990s. As mentioned above, the national reconstruction project set the model for necrocapitalism in Lebanon, where all construction (for state infrastructure and private development) was conducted through Solidere. As the government proxy, Solidere awarded contracts to companies owned by or associated with Hariri's allies. The commercial banks that loaned money for development projects and real estate ventures to the state via Solidere were owned by Hariri himself, those allied with the Prime Minister or other politicians and their allies. By the time Lebanon attempted to ascend to the WTO in the early 2000s, its internal debt was US$40 billion, almost twice its GDP (Dibeh, 2005).

Unlike countries such as Yemen, Syria or Iraq, Lebanon was not forgotten by the international community. Lebanon's strategic value is realised by regional and global players and the necrocapitalist oligarchy is well aware of this. Paris I (2001) and Paris II (2002) aid conferences in 2001-2002 raised almost US$5 billion in (promised) aid and Paris III (2007), after Israel's brutal 2006 war and wanton destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure, committed US$7.6 billion in financial aid and soft loans to Lebanon, in addition to almost US$1 billion previously pledged at a donor conference in Stockholm that same year (Atallah et al., 2018; Dibeh, 2005). Although Lebanon's pre-2006 debt doubled by 2018, the Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises (CEDRE) conference in Paris generated a capital investment plan (CIP) worth a billion dollars in grants and ten billion in loans from the European Union for a development project including rebuilding Lebanon's electricity grid and power plants and building its sewage, waste-management and recycling infrastructure (Atallah et al., 2018).

The most emblematic example of how necrocapitalism works in Lebanon is how the ruling class embezzled 25 million euros from the European Union, allocated to build a dozen recycling and compost plants throughout Lebanon. In the most egregious case, several ambassadors from the EU visited a staged processing plant, replete with empty, massive metal drums to look like machines, in a small North Lebanon village, Miniyeh. Meanwhile, the millions were funnelled off to a variety of construction companies with ties to various rival political parties and cases of cancer and other diseases skyrocketed in the area due to the overwhelmingly toxic waste dumping that seeped into the water (Jay, 2019). None of these funds have been recovered and no one has been charged. In the meantime, Électricite du Liban runs massive deficits, relying on inefficient, dirty and expensive oil and diesel turbines, at the same time as a powerful "generator mafia" – a cartel of the families and friends of various sectarian politicians – undermines modernisation (including establishing a renewable network in a country with 300 days of sun per annum in order to continue to supplement electricity during power cuts (that range from three to eighteen hours per day) (Abu-Rish, 2016; Geha, 2018).

Stabilising the necrocapitalist class

In October 2021, the "Pandora Papers", a massive cache of confidential financial documents leaked to the press, revealed hidden "off-shore" assets of more than 30 world leaders and 300 public officials (ICIJ, 2021) Among these leaders and figures, six Lebanese are named, including the current Prime Minister Najib Mikati, the former PM Hassan Diab, Riad Salameh, the head of the Central Bank, and Marwan Kheireddine, head of Mawarid (now AM) Bank, close allies of the Hariris and supporter of Talal Arslan, the Druze leader rival to Walid Jumblatt, leader of the multimillionaire feudal aristocratic family (Nasreddine, 2021a). These figures transferred billions of dollars to offshore companies to buy real estate in Europe and elsewhere. The revelation follows another exposé, only a month before the August explosion, by the former Minister of Finance, Alain Bifani, who resigned because Lebanon's banks had "smuggled" US$6 billion out of Lebanon while these same banks prohibited Lebanese citizens from withdrawing more than a US$100 a week. While the richest ruling elites were syphoning wealth from Lebanese banks, anticipating the complete collapse of the Lebanese lira, banks, too, were protecting their assets while freezing those of the ordinary Lebanese (Cornish, 2020).

The "crisis" in Lebanon (most recently, the Beirut blast and the economic meltdown) accelerated the structural, environmental, biological and social "slow death" that necrocapitalist sectarian elites manage. As Berlant shows, crisis is an inbuilt feature to perpetuate exploitative systems to acclimate populations to the perpetually degenerated "new norms". As the Pandora Papers reveal, the necrocapitalist order in Lebanon, even if standing in apparent tension with neoliberalism, is abetted by a neoliberal finance global economy, despite the demands, plans and fantasies of the EU's, UN's and World Bank's "people-centered" project for "reform, recovery and reconstruction" (World Bank, 2020). By thinking about Lebanon as a *nizam*, a comprehensive but fluid and

recalibrating social-political-economic system of necrocapitalism, with the help of thinkers as divergent as Trabousli, 'Amil, Gramsci, Hall and Mbembe, Berlant begins to provide us with the tools to discern how "reform" and international aid—intimately interwoven with international humanitarian and development aid—will institutionalise and stabilise the structure that "organizes transformation" in order to perpetuate its longevity (Berlant, 2016, p. 394).

In closing, if I gestured to the role of global finance capitalism in the maintenance of the Lebanese ruling class, I would also point to the role of the international community, especially the imperialist powers (most notably France and the USA), in enabling the Lebanese necrocapitalist order – even as it flies in the self-view of neoliberalism. Immediately after the explosion, French President Macron arrived in Lebanon, in classic colonialist fashion, to "reassure" the Lebanese people, as if they were his subjects. This reassurance, however, does not promise a new future or possibility; rather, it is a reassurance to restabilise the ideological foundation of the Lebanese state (a state that was birthed by the colonial master), whose necropolitical disregard of the population had been laid bare.

The French and international community, faced with the potential meltdown of their select allies within Lebanon, have promised aid with caveats of reform attached, especially as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had been in stalled negotiations with Lebanon from before August 2020. This call to reform from the coloniser to its native allies does not intend to ensure the demise of the necrocapitalist sectarian state but to better equip it more effectively as a neoliberal state that will not abscond with European and international aid. Reforms mean many things to the international community. To date, a US$10 billion loan has been promised by the IMF in addition to another US$11 billion committed in CEDRE, as we have seen above (Atallah et al., 2018). Yet among these billions of dollars, little consideration – other than superficial niceties – has been given by any international guarantor to attend to any social measures or safety nets for the population to attend to massive poverty, unemployment, income inequality, hunger and homelessness, as well as refugees, including Palestinians in Lebanon.

It is my argument that the IMF's demands for reform and structural adjustments and the World Bank's "reform, recovery, and reconstruction framework" actually work only to ensure the "modernisation" and "development" of the sectarian ruling class by drawing them more intimately into the neoliberal economic order, which also involves an unambiguous political agenda that includes disarming Hizbullah, antagonism with Iran, shoring up ties with rivals Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, absorbing the Palestinian population in Lebanon, and, eventually, normalisation with the state now known as Israel. Few are talking about this reality of what "reforms" actually mean when we see them attached to "aid". Moreover, we are failing to address how reforms only perpetuate the Lebanese *nizam*. Indeed, while so many international players are obsessed with the disarming of Hizbullah, none of them speak to the fact

that Hizbullah draws its power and legitimacy not from Iran but from the *sectarian system*. They draw their legitimacy from the stability of *al-nizam.*

Lebanon has an incredibly vibrant, creative and insightful civil society, which continues to oppose the state and its ruling class. As the years of popular uprisings demonstrate – most recently the 2014 "You Stink" Rebellion and the October Revolution of 2019 – Lebanese activist groups and organisations have confronted the necrocapitalist state through popular mobilisation and mass actions emerging from labour, environmental, women's, LBGTQ+, anti-sectarian and economic issues (Abu-Rish, 2014; Razazan, 2015). The previous year of popular demonstrations, led by *Hirak al-Sha'bi* (Popular Movement), called for the dismantling of the Lebanese government and all its ruling political "parties". Even before the revelations of the past year, they also demanded a forensic accounting and the repatriation of all monies embezzled since the end of the Civil War, since they had known about the sustained syphoning off of state finances into private coffers for decades. It is this inspirational revolution that has compelled me to contemplate the relevance of necrocapitalism as a system, as the *nizam* writ large, in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Despite the early stage of this research, I would like assert that necrocapitalism, as discussed in this article, is not a speculative claim. Rather, it is declarative statement. I have tried in this article to engage and mark the multiple contours and dimensions of necrocapitalism in thinking about hegemony and consent, affect and attachments within a comprehensive system of social and economic relations that inflicts physical, social and psychic violence. Necrocapitalism is intended as an inclusive term, drawing together practices of state capture, kleptocracy, ruling oligarchy and sectarian social relations with the functioning of a neoliberal state, whose population is not irrelevant. In this way, necrocapitalism in Lebanon is not the necropolitics of Mbembe or the necrocapitalism of Banerjee, because people are not explicitly outside of the ruling system. Rather, the population, through the affective power and social relations of sectarianism, are active participants in supporting the ruling class, which includes collaborating with its project of utter capitalist extraction.

Lebanon offers us a model to think about necrocapitalism as more than the necropolitical use of bodies as outside a regime of universal human rights, bodies as human waste, as industrial or environmental victims, or abject objects. Lebanon offers us a way to think about the systemic necrocapitalist assemblage of the state, the populace and the ruling class and the ideology that binds them. I invite others to think and research alongside me to interrogate this concept of necrocapitalism actively within the context of *al-khususiyat* of Lebanon and *al-kawnawiyat* that we find elsewhere. I look forward to the research, my own and that of others, in marking and making visible these complex and fluid infrastructures that facilitate necrocapitalism, to figure out the way that systems, structures, institutions, sovereignties, ideology, affective attachments

and identifications operate in concert to naturalise physical, social and psychic violence within the consensual communities that sectarianism forges.

Bio

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