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‘Excesses’ of modernity: mundane mobilities, politics and the remaking of the urban

Cars are celebrated as the technical and symbolic epitome of modernity but are also heavily implicated in the making of climate change, imbricated within a seemingly all-powerful global capitalist system. What can an anthropological analysis of traffic in urban areas tell us about the enduring strength of this system? While cars in Beirut are both desired and necessary to move about, strong feelings of frustration are taking shape among residents and commuters who face the ever-congested roads of the capital city daily. This mounting frustration indexes an emerging ‘structure of feeling’ towards everyday automobility that has created explicit and concrete desire for alternative mobilities, particularly public transport, which scholars of automobility had pronounced dead. In this light, while cars remain objects of desire, in Beirut as elsewhere, an ‘excess’ of automobility – of modernity, we might say – is in fact weakening the dominance of cars, exposing a potential brittleness previously undetected. Acknowledging this process forces us to reconsider our modernist assumptions about the inevitable predominance of cars and offers hope for alternative mobility futures.

Key words traffic, automobility, modernity, mobility, Lebanon

Introduction

In the summer of 2014, Daesh (ISIS) was swiftly capturing large portions of territory in Iraq and Syria, with Caliph al Baghdadi announcing the birth of a new caliphate from the Great Mosque of Mosul on 29 June. In early August, a confrontation broke out between the Lebanese army and militants belonging to ISIS and ISIS-affiliated *Jabat al Nusra* at the border town of Arsal, in northern Lebanon. Although the army successfully rebutted the attack, a number of Lebanese soldiers were taken captive, and the battle of Arsal (*ma'rakat Arsal*) would cast a long shadow over the political life of the country for months to come.

As is not uncommon in challenging circumstances, people turned to humour to face the difficult summer. A week or so after the attack, English-language online magazine *NOW* published a satirical article that attributed Daesh’s inability to invade Lebanon to the intense road congestion with which they would inevitably be confronted. Suitably entitled ‘Beirut blitz halted by traffic’, the article reported on a fictional phone conversation between the author and a Daesh spokesperson. The latter was supposed to be leading the invasion of Lebanon but instead he and his men had spent the past day blocked on the road at the outskirts of Beirut. Rather than taking responsibility for the fiasco, the official ascribed his failures to local extenuating circumstances:

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> Lebanon's cacophony of communities would make it difficult for us to win hearts and minds across the board – even if we succeeded in swaying a few Sunnis. And, most of all, there's your damn traffic […]. Excuse my *fusha* [literary Arabic], but it's impossible to get anything done in Lebanon! Traffic, traffic, traffic! (El Ghossain 2014: np)

The spokesperson heavily implied that his mighty army's descent on Beirut was hindered by a number of unforeseen circulation-related hurdles, from the collapse of a badly maintained bridge to the famous congestion besetting the Beirut port area. It was no wonder, the official argued, that the invasion had come to nothing: how could anyone accomplish anything in such conditions?

I came across the article a few months later and showed it to my Arabic teacher. In his mid-twenties, Nizar was a sharp social observer and regularly used pop culture and media resources to teach literary and colloquial Arabic, examining the mundane idiosyncrasies of Lebanese society with his students as a way to acquaint them with the country as well as its language. He was also endowed with a developed sense of humour and, during our classes, we often laughed at state-sponsored advertisements (*hamlat taw'iya*, awareness campaigns) aimed at educating citizens about the virtues of queuing or the ills of stealing public electricity. I was thus not surprised that Nizar enjoyed the article on account of the fact that, as he told me, everything the author said about driving in Lebanon – from drivers' misbehaviour to chronic congestion – was true. He himself worked in Beirut but lived in the mountains above the city, so he had plenty of first-hand experience of the hurdles posed by *'aj'a* (traffic), also commonly connotated as *fawda* (chaos), due to the kind of unruly driving behaviours outlined in the *NOW* article.

Before long, I realised that Nizar was not the only one to find the piece entertaining. Since being published, the article had become quite popular on social media, where friends and acquaintances living in Beirut shared it and demonstrated their appreciation for it.

The reason why the article moved Nizar and, potentially, other readers to laughter was that it played on an everyday experience with which most inhabitants are intimately familiar. A large urban conglomerate of over 1.5 million inhabitants, Beirut is well known in Lebanon for being a 'traffic disaster' (Sopranzetti 2018: 62) caused by more than bad driving behaviours and poor traffic management. On the one hand, a persistent, historical developmental imbalance between Beirut and the rest of the country means that job opportunities are disproportionately concentrated in the capital city. On the other, as a consequence of the post-Civil War (1975–1990) urban restructuring, increasingly unaffordable renting and living costs discourage or altogether prevent working-class and middle-class people from residing in proximity to their workplaces in Beirut (Anas et al. 2017; Aoun et al. 2013; Bekdache 2015). Thousands of commuters thus flow into Beirut daily, adding themselves to thousands more local residents. At peak hour, the city, its suburbs and satellite towns are trapped in horrific congestion that clogs transport arteries far beyond the capital. This has caused high and growing noise and air pollution levels, and associated health risks (Chaaban et al. 2000; Chalak et al. 2016; Rose 2019). Navigating Beirut in these circumstances is a rather daunting prospect.

Within the social sciences, scholars have agreed that, ideologically, cars represent the values best associated with modernity – individualism, freedom, advancement – so that a love of cars is frequently read as a love of modernity (Cresswell 2010; Dean 2016;

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Salazar 2017; Urry 2004; Vannini 2010). Indeed, with the construction of roads, regulations and new subjectivities, automobility has shaped the physical, political and social landscape of our world, especially in urban centres (Bohm et al. 2006; Sheller and Urry 2000). Automobility has also proven to be a fruitful site to illuminate gendered, classed and racialised experiences of the city (Czeglédy 2004; Truitt 2008; Yazici 2013) as well as the workings of state power, corruption and governmentality (Monroe 2017; Notar 2017). Moreover, and importantly for this article, scholars have found desire for, or engagement in, automobility to be a vehicle of class distinction, a marker of modernity, and a sign of (aspiration to) middle-classness, the modern social class *par excellence* (Monroe 2011; Notar 2012; Traboulsi 2014). Yet, it is precisely this 'love affair' with cars and modernity that heavily contributes to immobilising urban centres worldwide. As Beth Notar has noted, 'we cannot assume that mobility leads to freedom' (2012: 281).

Despite the overwhelmingly positive identification of cars with modernity and seamlessness, feelings of ambiguity about automobility do exist and are created by the concrete, everyday experience of driving itself. Catherine Lutz's (2014) exploration of everyday driving in the USA, for instance, reveals that owning a car is often desired by people, but that driving is a trying, unpleasurable experience for many of them. In fact, while inhabitants might need cars for practical reasons, such as commuting to work, factors such as one's ethnicity, class or immigration status weight considerably on individual experiences of automobility, be it because of the costs of running a car or the dangers entailed by driving without papers. While cars might often play an important role in realising life-projects, automobility might not always translate into, nor be associated with, freedom and unhindered mobility. Likewise, work on taxi drivers in China and Burma (Notar et al. 2018; Zhang 2016) shows that the immobility produced by road congestion and economic stagnation reduces cars' ability to fulfil the modern promise of prosperity and social mobility, while remaining necessary means to secure a livelihood.

It is this tension between *practising* automobility and *desiring* it that I make my object of analysis. I ask: what happens to people's attachments to cars when automobility takes place in dense, congested urban environments beset with traffic, where both concrete and existential mobility (Hage 2009) is hindered by intensive car use? My interest in mobility first emerged in 2014–15, while I was conducting ethnographic research on the privatisation of urban commons and followed the activities of various civic campaigns working to save what little green space is left in Beirut, namely the coast and a handful of parks (Harb 2018; Saksouk-Sasso 2015). As I gathered residents' and activists' feelings about the lack of freely accessible green spaces, concerns about traffic and the suffocating nature of urban life continuously cropped up in conversation with my mainly middle-class interlocutors. Architects, university students and NGO workers alike drew frequent connections between these seemingly separate issues, alerting me to their complementarity and to the centrality of everyday mobility to understand actors' experiences of space, place and modern urbanity (cf. Porter et al. 2010).

I explore these questions in Beirut mobilising archival, ethnographic and interview data collected over 18 months since 2014 as, after the initial period of research on public space, I returned for shorter, periodic visits focused more specifically on mobility. Examining the challenges and quotidian experiences of automobility in Beirut, I maintain, reveals a complex and multifaceted picture of people's relationship with mobility

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in a large metropolitan environment. I contend that while cars remain objects of desire, an 'excess' of automobility – of modernity, one might say – is making inhabitants' attitude towards them more ambivalent, as driving becomes an impediment rather than a facilitator of everyday life. Although residents' attachment to cars should not be downplayed, my material indicates that, due to the immobilising consequences of traffic, a clear feeling of ambivalence towards current mobility practices is taking root among middle-class Beirutis, and that dreams of efficient public transport are becoming more widespread. These changing attitudes I understand as an emerging 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) about urban mobility, a form of social pre-consciousness and disposition that is emergent but not yet established at the collective level. I contend that while this emerging structure of feeling is not substantially disrupting residents' attachments to modernity and its promises of progress (Touraine 1992), unbridled automobility is forcing inhabitants to reimagine the shape of mobility in urban environments.

I begin to develop my argument below by tracing the political and economic genealogy of traffic in Beirut, pointing to the production of the city (Lefebvre 1991) as a 'space for cars'. I then present an ethnographically driven analysis of the concrete ways in which road congestion is contributing to immobilising inhabitants, before turning to Beirutis' dissatisfaction with car mobility. Taking their feelings seriously, I argue, reveals that attachment to fossil-fuelled, capitalist mobility is a complex and fraught affair, and that different horizons of mobility have already begun to be articulated, and even demanded by city dwellers.

A city for cars

The relationship between cars, traffic and middle-class modernity, and its significance in shaping contemporary Lebanon, becomes evident if examined in the *longue durée*. Cars first appeared in Lebanon in the 1910s, and by the 1970s they had become a permanent feature of mobility in the city. While cars featured widely in the streets of Beirut as taxis for shared and private hire, private automobility remained the preserve of the upper-middle and upper classes. A 'trademark of consumer society' (Kassir 2010: 377) in Lebanon as across the globe, the car was a defining trait of an emerging urban modern lifestyle that incarnated ideals of independence, middle-classness and masculinity (Green-Simms 2017; Jackson 2019; McShane 1994; Monroe 2014; Thompson 2000). The progressive expansion of automobility was tightly bounded to the Lebanese political economy. From the 1940s onwards, automobility played a decisive role in the establishment of the tourist industry, which in turn fuelled the construction industry that realised infrastructural projects connected with the expansion of motorised tourism itself, such as roads, tunnels and motorways (Gates 1998).

Automobility also helped shape the perception of the national space-time in the post-independence era. With a size of just over 10,000 square kilometres, Lebanon is a comparatively small country where, thanks to motorised transport, most destinations can be reached in a matter of hours. From the vantage point of car owners, especially in Beirut, the country can be easily 'conquered'. Thanks to its ability to compress the space-time, driving has allowed Lebanon to be imagined, perceived, and practised as even smaller and more intimate by anyone with access to a car. By compressing time and distance in this manner, and reshaping the imagination of the country, 20th-century automobility thus helped produce in Lebanon a truly modern nation-scape for

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the truly modern subjects, the urban middle classes. It was precisely the availability of motorised transport that enabled the birth of one of country's most beloved national myths, the notion that, in Lebanon, one can ski on Mount Lebanon and bathe in the Mediterranean Sea in the same day. Slowly but surely, cars overtook the Ottoman-era railways as the epitome of modern mobility in the country.

Since then, the 'love affair' between cars and the Lebanese has continued to grow; the country has high rates of motorised vehicles per inhabitants,[1] and cars are still a marker of status and social position, to the extent that travelling by bus is often shunned as a lower-class pursuit. While private automobility might be most common among the middle classes, reliance on cars, and on motorised transport more generally, is far more generalised. Most mobility in Beirut, as well as to and from the city, takes place by motorised vehicles – whether privately owned cars, mopeds, buses or taxis, including the popular *service*, a shared taxi operating on a fixed fare. In principle, pedestrians are not ignored in the design of road infrastructure, as pavements and zebra crossings do exist. However, in practice moving on foot is not easy, partly because of the poor conditions of pavements, which are often uneven, damaged, or used as parking areas. Crossings and traffic lights are also often missing, or not respected. Cyclists too have a hard time, as they compete against motorists for space. Lastly, rail transport is completely absent: Beirut's tramway service, inaugurated in 1908, was dismantled in the 1960s allegedly due to financial unviability, while train service was halted at the onset of the Civil War and never resumed. Beirut itself, I was told time and time again, is 'a city for cars', a place where other types of movement are marginalised by the predominance of automobility, broadly defined. The consequence of this intensive use of cars for all types of journeys and purposes is, of course, traffic.

When *fawda* is not blamed on the Lebanese's attitude to driving, popular discourse attributes it to the absence of effective state regulation during the war years (Monroe 2011). Yet, traffic in the city centre was already a matter of concern in the 1960s, despite the much lower number of cars on the road (Kassir 2010; McCarthy 1975). Urban planners warned at the time that the expected increased car use would clog the city's arteries and that planning measures to prevent this should be implemented straightaway (Verdeil 2012). However, insufficient action was taken by successive administrations, whose policies traditionally promoted the interests of the banking and real estate sectors.

Policy-makers' attitude towards planning transport and mobility did not change after the Civil War. In the early 1990s, the Council for Development and Reconstruction entrusted a Lebanese engineering and consulting firm with designing a new transportation plan for the Greater Beirut Area. The firm produced several reports in the mid-1990s diagnosing the capital city's transport issues, followed by an Immediate Transport Action Plan in 2000. Besides encouraging authorities to conduct a programme of awareness-raising to mitigate 'driver-caused' problems such as ignoring traffic lights, reports recommended a structural reform of the road network and, crucially, a rigorous reorganisation of public transport. Consultants, in fact, warned that 'by the year 2010, the level of congestion of the street network will start reaching intolerable levels [and that the Greater Beirut area] cannot possibly be served without a well-developed public transport system' (Team International, Iaurif and Sofretu 1995:

[1] Around one car in four people in 2007, based on Ministry of the Environment data (http://climatechange.moe.gov.lb/viewfile.aspx?id=45) Accessed March 2021.

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17). The public bus service was to be better funded and reorganised; taxi-*services* were supposed to operate on set lines and between fixed terminals and, together with buses, they were to only pick up passengers at designated stops. These actions seemingly nodded to a return to the more structured and regimented system existing before the war. This system had in fact emerged in Beirut in the 1960s also as a 'structure of feeling' about modernity (Monroe 2017), though one heralding a new era of urban order and civilisation (see also Nakkash and Jouzy 1973). Reports also assumed that the railways would be re-opened, speaking of their rehabilitation in terms of 'when', rather than 'if'. Consultants' recommendations seemingly fell on deaf ears. Instead of boosting the bus and rail networks, the government concentrated on road construction. More taxi licences were also released on the market, boosting the number of vehicles on the streets.

In the 20-odd years that separate us from these reports, a number of large-scale plans for transport in Greater Beirut have been designed, often with the financial backing of international institutions such as the World Bank. All of these entailed a thorough update and improvement of the public bus service, but again, implementation remained lacking. In 1998, for instance, the government purchased 200 buses that were never put into operation and eventually ended up discarded in the Mar Mikhael bus station. Today, the bus service is largely operated by private companies, alongside a smaller number of state-run buses. Although the service is cheap, it is often not very comfortable or reliable, and does not serve all areas equally. Rail transport never resumed. Meanwhile, the developmental imbalance between Beirut and the rest of the country has not been redressed, and ever-increasing numbers of commuters travel to the capital city each day, using their own car whenever possible. Overall, it appears that predictions made in the 1990s have indeed come true.

A changing space-time

John Urry (2004) has rightly noted that automobility simultaneously allows and imposes extreme flexibility on those who engage in it, as the availability of cars means that commuters are forced to repeatedly drive, each day, between their homes, workplaces and leisure spaces, often far apart from each other. Residents and commuters in Beirut are precisely caught in such extreme flexibility, as it is the availability of motorised transport that makes an economic system based on commuting possible in the first place. In Beirut as in other commuting cities, inhabitants' recourse to cars is in fact not a free choice as much as an imposed necessity. For many, cars are thus both a blessing and a curse. This included Nizar, my Arabic teacher. Despite his age, Nizar had years of experience teaching Arabic to the many European and North American students who regularly spend the summer in Beirut to learn the language. Nizar was also completing a master's degree in social sciences at the university to which I was attached during fieldwork, and we were put in touch by a common friend. The arrangement was particularly convenient, since we could easily meet on campus. This itself was a luxury, as the university grounds were beautifully green, quiet and relatively removed from the chaos of the city around us. The campus was also highly exclusive, as only students and faculty – or those who could look the part – were allowed access. Nizar and I initially scheduled our classes in the late afternoon, arranging to meet in a quiet corner near the Faculty of Medicine. We could then sit at one of the outdoor tables and, when

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the connection allowed it, use the university Wi-Fi to watch videos and browse other online resources.

Once we began with our classes, it quickly transpired that Nizar was extremely busy. Besides tutoring me, he worked for an educational NGO; this job required him to drive up and down the country nearly every day to survey different schools, meet local project managers, resolve emergencies and oversee the smooth unravelling of the charity's operations. In addition, Nizar travelled daily between Beirut and the village where he still lived, nestled in the mountains overlooking the capital city. He thus spent a large portion of his time in his car and frequently at peak time. As Nizar was often on the road for work, coming or going from one of his assignments, it was common for him to become stuck in the afternoon traffic. Close to the time of our class, I would often receive WhatsApp vocal messages where he cheerfully yet apologetically informed me that he was once again caught up on the road or could not find a parking space – another gruelling task in Beirut. To make matters worse, the university campus was unfortunately located between two notoriously trafficked thoroughfares. Messages were usually accompanied by a loud background of cars honking, tyres braking and drivers shouting profanities at each other. It quickly became clear that 5pm classes were a terrible idea. Eventually, as my and Nizar's work schedules filled up, we moved our meetings to the evening, when the roads were clear of cars and we could both get to our appointment comfortably.

I found myself in awe of Nizar's tenacity, as he braved the roads at rush hour to uphold the hyper-flexibility that his working life demanded of him and that driving enabled him to fulfil. Yet, although I never heard him complain seriously about the circumstances, these were clearly not ideal. The long hours spent on the road were tedious and took up a sizeable chunk of his day. At weekends, Nizar often posted on social media bucolic pictures of the view from his home in the mountain, declaring that he was finally enjoying himself away from the 'cement jungle' of Beirut, as he called it. Eventually, Nizar moved to Beirut to be closer to work and university, but continued sharing such pictures whenever he visited home, continuing to mark out the chasm he experienced between the chaos of Beirut and the quiet of the mountains.

Nizar's calm and ever cheerful approach to the challenges of commuting was remarkable, especially as episodes of road rage (*ghadab*) are a well-known feature of traffic in the city. However, Nizar's predicament in itself was not exceptional. This was also the daily experience of several friends who worked or studied in Beirut, and many NGO volunteers and staff whose activities I followed during my fieldwork on green space advocacy. Given the concentration of jobs and educational opportunities in Beirut, the capital becomes the daily destination of thousands of commuters driving from other towns or parts of its large and expanding hinterland. While some of these commuters might choose not to live in Beirut for personal reasons or mere preference, others are simply unable to afford renting, let alone buying there, due to skyrocketing property prices and living costs, which are proving unaffordable not only for marginalised populations but also increasingly the middle classes (Aoun et al. 2013).

Cars might enable the flexibility that these complex circumstances require and be an enduring sign of social status, but it would be a mistake to believe that motorists do not feel frustration about them. The sensorial experience of the materiality of a car stuck on the road is in fact a very far cry from the idealised picture of seamless journeying sometimes proposed in the literature (Sheller and Urry 2000; Thrift 2009) and is in fact far more visceral, sensorial and emotional (Balkmar and Mellström 2020;

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Katz 2014; Dawson 2017). One might be forced into the same position for long hours, unable to stretch, move, change position, with the outcome that their body, their back, neck and knees, might begin to ache. In summer, the car might get hot, suffocating; in winter, flooded roads become treacherous to navigate. Travellers might be getting late for work, which makes them stressed, adding to the frustration of having been forced in the same spot on the road for a seemingly endless stretch of time. Sitting in a car that has been nearly completely still in the midst of others for the past 30 minutes makes the journey demoralising, infuriating. Drivers as well as passengers become irritated, angry, bored. They hardly feel free, in control and at the edge of modernity. If the car is supposed to epitomise the promises of progress and freedom, it surely does not feel so when it is stuck in traffic.

The permanent road congestion created by commuting has also altered collective representations of the country and its space-time. The 1950s 'myth' of a small country where skiing and swimming can happen in the same day is in fact eroded: as congestion makes short distances far more time-consuming to travel, places are becoming further than they used to be, with the consequence that the country itself seems to be expanding. For Nizar, for instance, the journey home from university could take 20 minutes or an hour, the 30 kilometres separating Beirut and his village shrinking and dilating according to the time of day. The smallness of the country is still invoked and reiterated in common parlance; Beirutis often refer to places in Mount Lebanon or along the coast as being close, but these declarations usually come with the implicit acknowledgement that the travelling must happen off-peak. Two radically different models of Lebanese space-time thus coexist today, between which inhabitants have to switch multiple times a day. A country that thanks to automobility once came to be perceived as small and within relatively easy reach, at least by the middle classes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Massey 2012; Salazar and Smart 2011), has become larger and more difficult to travel, because of an 'excess' of the same mobility.[2] From the vantage viewpoint of Beirut, modernity seems to be characterised by traffic, rather than seamlessness; it seems that the triumph of modernity on the road might in fact have provoked its own ideological unravelling.

Desiring public transport

As detailed in previous sections, in the midst of *'aj'a* and *fawda*, driving in Beirut is for many less an engine of freedom and more the source of much stress, wasted time and complications. If the experience of traffic has changed the Lebanese perception of the national space-time, it has also affected motorists' perception of automobility itself. Besides anger, the challenging nature of driving in traffic translates into a desire for alternatives, at least for the purpose of everyday movement. Although during fieldwork I primarily sought to talk to people about green space, public transport continually surfaced in those conversations.

One such instance occurred as I was sitting in the back of a cab with Amal, an NGO consultant. A third passenger had just been let on and, as Amal and I had

[2] As Fawaz et al. (2012) have demonstrated, marginalised populations' ability to travel freely is further impacted by security practices and infrastructures, which incidentally also contribute to creating congestion.

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instinctively shuffled to the left to make room for him, all three of us were now compressed against each other in the tight space of the rear seat. This seemed to remind Amal of her own recent holiday in Europe. A professional in her mid-thirties, Amal had grown up in Beirut and attended university abroad before returning home to work for a developmental NGO. She spoke several languages and was a firm believer in escaping the intensity and chaotic day-to-day life of Beirut when possible – something that she described as a need to 'take a break' from the city, from time to time. It was clear that Amal had enjoyed her time abroad and took pleasure in telling me about it, revelling in the good memories. As she recalled her holiday, Amal explained how she had felt relaxed during her visit to Germany. 'The best thing about Berlin', she told me wistfully, 'is that it's effortless.' She particularly loved taking the metro, where she could simply 'sit down and enjoy the journey'. There was no pushing yourself into the tight space of a minivan, or passengers sweating onto each other in the back of an old taxi: one could just relax and be, not needing to worry about anything else. This she related strongly to the availability of open, well-kept green spaces dotted around the city, where she had enjoyed taking breaks between activities. From public transport to public parks, Berlin was easy to navigate and offered inhabitants opportunities to take a step back from the hustling and bustling of urban life and relax. This contrasted starkly with Beirut, where the density of the built environment, the intensity of traffic, and the absence of parks made everyday life a trying and exhausting experience, thus affecting the quality of life of its residents. From Amal's point of view, what Beirut needed to make life better for its inhabitants was what Berlin seemed to have, in her words, 'everything public'. 'Here very few people resist the "private equals good, public equals bad" rhetoric', she told me, exasperated. 'The idea is that the public must be dismissed because it is ineffective, failing, and for the lower classes'. Yet, she saw public transport and public parks as necessary antidotes to the otherwise unbearable conditions of an expensive, intense, polluted urban life more generally.

Amal was not the only one to feel that way about Beirut. Earlier that afternoon we had joined a pro-public space demonstration in front of the *baladia* (municipality), where a contingent of around 60 campaigners had protested the municipal council's disregard for the city's green commons. These activists belonged to several civic campaigns and environmental NGOs who were vocal in denouncing the lack of liveability in Beirut and the responsibilities of the entire political class in creating such a polluted and suffocating city. The gathering at the *baladia* might have been small, yet similar grievances would soon come to be actively shared and expressed by thousands of other Lebanese, as the now-infamous garbage crisis (*azma al zbeleh*) hit the country in the summer of 2015. As the government failed to secure a new landfill site to stock refuse from Beirut and Mount Lebanon, rubbish bags piled high in the streets of the capital, and growing numbers of protesters took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction over the management of the crisis and, more broadly, the country. This sentiment was encapsulated in protesters' placards, where the faces of politicians of all stripes and colours were applied to rubbish bags to be 'recycled'. Nizar's experience, Amal's remarks and the *zbeleh* protests remind us that mobility and urbanity must be examined together, as the two are interrelated and mutually constitutive of each other: difficult mobility is an aspect of difficult urbanity, and frustration with one signals frustration with the other.

The desire for mobility alternatives is becoming more and more manifest, particularly in the area of public transport, as attested by the experience of campaigners

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who have been working to bring back the Lebanese railway since 2005. Initially a loose group of concerned citizens, campaigners eventually established themselves as an NGO to strengthen their position and expand the scope and reach of their activities. The original catalyst of the campaign had been traffic. As one train activist once pointed out to me, transport is meant to make people mobile, not the opposite:

> We were looking for a solution [to congestion]. Do we really have the mobility we are supposed to have? We can't ski and then go to the beach in the same day as we used to, because of traffic. The country is getting smaller and bigger at the same time.

For campaigners, rehabilitating the railways was an obvious move to improve the situation. Hoping that raising awareness about this heritage would help raise support about their proposals, the association organised talks and exhibitions centred on the history of the railways. Attendees loved to see pictures of trains darting through the Lebanese landscape in old blank and white pictures; some became emotional, shedding a tear for what had been and no longer was.

However, campaigners also encountered some deep-seated scepticism about their proposal, as many wrongly assumed that rehabilitating the railways would be an expensive, large-scale undertaking similar to those underway at the time in Gulf countries, where the network had to be built from scratch. Used to the inaction of politicians when it came to large projects of national interest, the public had little faith that the Lebanese government could successfully accomplish a similar infrastructural feat.

Years of efforts later, things seemed to be looking up. In 2019, the director of the NGO sounded optimistic as he updated me on progress made in recent years. Fouad and I met at Paul, a fashionable café located in an old mansion at the entrance of the Gemmeyze neighbourhood. We sat outside, in the lovely-looking patio area, lined with potted plants to create a sense of separation between the café and the pavement. This was not an unusual strategy for cafés in the city, where businesses work hard to provide customers with a haven from the outdoor *fawda*. Unfortunately, despite the management's best efforts, the noise of car horns and angry shouting seeped in from the street, one of central Beirut's busiest arteries. As we had to interrupt the conversation a number of times to wait out outbursts of honking, Fouad and I joked that this seemed an appropriate environment to discuss traffic. Fouad seemed certain that trains could ensure a brighter future for Lebanon, not only to beat traffic but also to bring about the much-needed economic development that the country desperately needed. The economic instability had worsened in the last couple of years, although the government would not default on his foreign currency loans for another 22 months. After years of committed awareness-raising campaigning, Fouad seemed hopeful that more of his compatriots were beginning to share his vision. When they organised events, people now showed real interest in their plans, he said, often asking when trains would be back. Although their work was not over yet, there were signs that trains were gradually reappearing in people's imagination.

Scholars have pointed out that when modernity is seen as lacking in one's surroundings, such as in development and migratory contexts, it tends to be perceived as existing elsewhere, 'there' in the city or the destination of migration that one aspires to reach (Dick 2010; Yarrow 2017). In Lebanon, instead, mobility modernity seems to be partly located 'then' in a local past characterised by emptier streets and rail travel,

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which manifests today on the road only at off-peak times. Accordingly, the imagination of alternative future mobility focuses on technologies that promise to expand this 'residual' off-peak modernity and make it permanent.

Interestingly, politicians seemed to have noticed the growing feeling of dissatisfaction with the state of transport in Beirut. During the 2018 parliamentary elections, railway campaigners approached candidates asking them to publicly pledge to support the rehabilitation of the railways if elected. Several candidates accepted. Their pledges were video recorded and uploaded on social media for everyone to see. Some politicians even began to propose the return of the railways spontaneously. The same week I spoke to Fouad, the Interior Minister spontaneously declared at a rally that the city needed trams and trains rather than more cars, roads, and tunnels (L'Orient Le Jour 2019).

A new 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) about mobility seems to be taking shape in Beirut, one that even politicians are beginning to legitimise, at least in rhetoric. The concept of the 'structure of feeling' here is a useful analytical tool because it is able to detect and highlight attitudes that exist but are not yet settled and that contradict the established view on cars, pushing us to appreciate the nuances of people's relationship with urban mobility. A structure of feeling allows us to accept that cars might be desired for a road trip but disliked for everyday commuting, and to appreciate that people's relationship to mobility and modernity is not monolithic. While it has the potential to be a majoritarian view in the making, an emergent 'structure of feeling' is not teleological, nor does it entail an instantaneous and pervasive revolution in attitudes and practices. Here, a structure of feeling about public transport does not equate to a prediction of the imminent demise of cars in Beirut. Rather, it notes a possibility, and is a powerful indicator of shifting sensibilities that are brewing collectively beyond the surface, not only in relation to cars, but to urbanity more generally.

Conclusion

With the expansion of automobility, issues of congestion are no longer the unique concern of a handful of global metropolises, since medium-sized cities are equally swallowed up by traffic (Lutz and Lutz Fernandez 2010; Khan 2016). An 'excess' of automobility has betrayed modernity's promise of speed, paradoxically paralysing city dwellers. Rather than being an aberration, or symptoms of 'urban maladjustment' (Aldred 2014: 461), congestion and immobility are direct products of a system of urban mobility structured around cars. As scholars have observed, global industrial capitalism, one of the markers of global modernity, holds within itself the seed of its destruction, since its indiscriminate exploitation of the natural environment threatens the survival of the planet itself (Crate 2011; Moore 2015; Polanyi 1944). Modern mobility seems to be following a similar course. From its role in climate change to its paralysing effect on urban life, it seems that automobility is undoing the freedom of movement it was supposed to have delivered. This can be seen clearly from Beirut, where public transport is devalued and underfunded, and non-motorised mobility is virtually non-existent. Here extreme automobility causes not seamlessness but inertia, not only for the urban poor depending on public transport but also for the car-owning middle classes, modern urban subject *par excellence*. Crucially these 'car troubles' create feelings of ambivalence and dissatisfaction with everyday automobility, despite the car's enduring allure as an emblem of social status and modern living.

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At the same time, dissatisfaction with current automobility does not equal to a *tout court* rejection of its promises: a modernist desire for speed, progress and seamlessness persists among city dwellers, but its object is shifting. As cars in certain everyday contexts become equated with immobility, transport technologies that had seemingly become outdated are being re-signified as desirable solutions to the ills of unfettered automobility. For a growing number of middle-class urban dwellers in Beirut, trains and more efficient public transport are now more desirable than cars in certain circumstances, as they enable forward movement in those areas of everyday life where automobility fails, for instance commuting. Practising automobility provides the conditions for people to desire an alternative that keeps the promise of modernity – seamlessness, speed and aspiration – without its dangerous 'excesses'.

The incipient disaffection towards cars observed in Beirut can be taken as a symptom of an urban malaise to which automobility is a contributor, but that extends to broader issues of urban governance: pollution, lack of urban green, and failing infrastructure. The 'structure of feeling' about mobility in the capital is itself connected to people's more general urban experience, from the disappearance of urban commons, to pollution, and the trials of accessing basic services – water, electricity, fuel. Denouncing the failings of urban governance and its embeddedness in the country's sectarian rule and widespread political corruption have remained a prominent feature of continued anti-system protests since 2015. It is no coincidence that many of my interlocutors who dreamt of trains, as well as other members of the middle classes, have joined and played a significant role in the development of some of these various political projects, from the electoral initiative of the *Beirut Madinati*'s municipal civic list in 2016 to the more recent events of the*Thawra* (Revolution) of October 2019 (see also Deeds 2018; Harb 2018).

Exploring issues of mobility and liveability in Beirut can also be taken as an instance of how looking at modernity as it unfolds outside what is traditionally thought to be its 'centre' may not teach us how non-Western countries 'catch up' with Western modernity (Mitchell 2000). Rather, it may provide evidence of how modernity, much like global capitalism (Harvey and Krohn-Hansen 2018), is uneven and generates multiple histories and experiences that are different, yet connected, and that can inform our methodological approach to investigating regimes of automobility and urbanity everywhere. Since urban restructuring and progressive social exclusion are by no means specific to this ethnographic context (Lees et al. 2015), exploring emerging 'structures of feeling' around traffic can serve as an entry point to examine the challenges that contemporary urban life poses to city-dwellers, in Lebanon and elsewhere, and the ways in which they respond to them. Rather than speculating over the best way to 'get people out of cars' (Sheller and Urry 2000: 751), perhaps it would be more productive to examine the alternative arrangements people themselves have begun to imagine, and the political, social and economic blockages and obstacles that stand in their way. This understanding, in turn, might help us detect the potential foundations of a 'veritable new urbanity' (Urry 2004: 33) in the making that is already developing, slowly and piecemeal, right before our eyes.

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Les « excès » de la modernité: les mobilités mondaines, la politique et le remaniement de l'urbain

Les voitures sont célébrées comme l'incarnation technique et symbolique de la modernité, mais elles sont aussi fortement impliquées dans la fabrication du changement climatique, imbriquées dans un système capitaliste mondial apparemment tout-puissant. Que peut nous apprendre une analyse anthropologique de la circulation dans les zones urbaines sur la force durable de ce système? Alors que les voitures à Beyrouth sont à la fois dési-rées et nécessaires pour se déplacer, un fort sentiment de frustration se fait jour parmi les résidents et les navetteurs qui affrontent quotidiennement les routes toujours encombrées de la capitale. Cette frustration croissante indique l'émergence d'une « structure de sentiment » à l'égard de l'automobilité quotidienne qui a créé un désir explicite et concret de mobilité alternative, en particulier les transports publics, qui avaient été longtemps déclarés morts. Dans ce contexte, si les voitures restent des objets de désir, à Beyrouth comme ailleurs, un « excès » d'automobilité – de modernité, pourrait-on dire – affaiblit en fait la domination des voitures, exposant une fragilité potentielle jusqu'alors non détectée. Reconnaître ce processus nous oblige à reconsidérer nos hypothèses modernistes sur l'inévitable prédominance de l'automobile et offre l'espoir d'un avenir de mobilité alternative.

Mots-clés circulation, automobilité, modernité, mobilité, Liban

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