

Café Culture in Beirut

A Center for Civil Society (16th century – present)

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Abstract

Beirut is the capital city of Lebanon, a small country on the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Its location in the Middle East positions it to be a link with the West, but also a site of political contention and instability.

While the conditions of the city change, the café is consistently at the heart of a thriving social, cultural and political life. The café is a meeting place, an art gallery, a movie theatre, a music hall, a night club, a center for political activism, and a refuge for people to escape the daily pressures and tensions of life.

In my thesis I argue that café culture in Beirut is a vibrant and necessary component of civil society. The café culture survived hundreds of years of social, political and economic changes, from the time that Beirut was a *vilayet* of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century until today. In the first chapter I explain the history of cafés in the Arab world. In the second chapter I discuss the modern café culture in Beirut (1940-1975), which grew out of the city's economic boom that was largely created by regional political factors. In the third chapter I touch on the destructive effects of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) on civilian life and café culture, and I describe contemporary cafés and their supportive role in the reconstruction of civil society. The influx of international corporate cafés into Beirut's neighborhoods leads some to argue that café culture in Beirut is dying. This paper, however, shows that café culture thrives, though differently than it once did, and that these changes do not represent the death of café culture, but the evolution of café culture, that continues to serve as a place that cultivates civil society.

Beirut

Beirut of the hundred palaces and Beryte of the stones
Where people come from everywhere to build up statues
Which make man kneel down in prayer and make wars roar

In Beirut in every house dwells a different idea
In Beirut every word is a parade
In Beirut men lay down thoughts and caravans

Whether she is a nun or a sorcerer
Or both together.....

Adorned or cursed
Blood thirsty or blessed with holy water
Phoenician, Arab or anybody
A Levantine with multiple vertigos
Like those strange flowers fragile on their stalks
Beirut is in the Orient the last sanctuary
Where man is clad in the color of light.¹

~ Nadia Tueini

¹ Translated from French to English by Mona Takiuddin Amyuni

Introduction:

Café culture has been a resilient feature of life in Beirut throughout the city's history, and provides a lens through which we can gain insight into this complex city. Beirut is the capital of Lebanon (area 10452 sq km)¹, and lies on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea (see figure 1). It has a population of 1.2 million in a country with a total population of 4.2 million. To the east of Beirut is the Lebanon mountain range. Some say it looks like San Francisco, and some say it feels like New Orleans.² In the last few years "sleek, modern buildings are springing up, alongside arabesque Ottoman and French-style buildings, giving Beirut a unique style that is all its own. [It] brims with cafés, pubs, and restaurants catering to a range of local and international tastes"³

Café culture survived hundreds of years of social, political and economic changes, from the time that Beirut was a *vilayet*⁴ of the Ottoman Empire in 16th century (see figure 2) through the 21st century. No matter the city's trials and tribulations, people did not stop frequenting their favorite café. Throughout its colorful history, the café functioned as a public meeting place for business, trade, and for socializing, as a location at which to seek employment, as a post office, and as a place for entertainment, where the itinerant storyteller, *al-hakawati*, would hold his audience captive for hours.

The number and variety of cafés increased as Beirut's city limits grew over time. At the end of World War I, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the Allied powers redrew the map of the Middle East in what is known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (see figure 3). By this

¹ al-hakawati Arab Culture Trust. <<http://www.al-hakawati.net>>.

² This observation comes from my own experience and from conversations with Americans in Beirut.

³ al-hakawati.net

⁴ Vilayet means state

agreement the French and the British divided the region between themselves. Lebanon was created and placed under French Mandate (1917-1946) (see figure 4). The Lebanese government worked with French planners to develop and decentralize Beirut. Downtown cafés continued to thrive, as modern cafés began to open in the 1950's and 1960's in Ras Beirut, an area west of downtown (see figure 5). This marked an era of café culture dominated by political and intellectual discussions as well as debates that the intelligentsia from Lebanon and the surrounding Arab countries held freely in the public space of a local café. The modern café culture is a reflection of the end of World War II, which brought its own changes and a new map for the region. The State of Israel was created in Palestine by the United Nations in 1948, and 800,000 Palestinians were forced to flee as refugees to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. This unexpected turn of events brought forth strong Arab national feelings, which originated during the European colonial time.

Another major upheaval to the city of Beirut came with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 and the café remained resilient. Within a year, Beirut was divided by sectarian conflict into Muslim West Beirut and Christian East Beirut. The war continued over the next fifteen years, at times so heated that it disrupted all forms of civil life, other times conflict was localized, and only disrupted life in a specific neighborhood or even a specific street. Wars, civil and regional, changed the demographic, physical, political and social aspects of life in the city. Cafés, like other businesses, continued to function throughout these crises, even if some did close down for a while, only to re-open when security conditions improved. During difficult times the café was a place which provided an opportunity to break out of the daily routine to meet friends, to afford oneself a treat and a change.⁵ It also provided a focus and a destination to walk to as well as a barometer of the situation. It is a public space away from the confines of the

⁵ Personal Interview: Maurice Khoury, 2007.

private space of home and family.

Beirut's cafés are diverse and have evolved over time. Some of the older cafés live on and continue to be patronized by people from all generations. At the same time a new kind of café culture that appeals to the younger generation is emerging, which suggests the continued importance of cafés in contemporary society. The resilience of both old and new cafés in Beirut has allowed for the continuation of a strong civil society.

In my research on cafés in Beirut, an article edited by Sakr Abu-Fakhir in *al-Quds al-Arabia* newspaper called “The Cultural Coffee Shops: Beirut, the Boost of Modern Literature,” gives a history of cafés in Beirut from the Ottoman period until present day, and lists cafés and the notable people who patronized them in four Beirut neighborhoods: Downtown, Ras Beirut, the area around the Arab University, and Raouche (see figure 6). He argues that in light of the changes in their function as hubs for political activists before the Lebanese civil war, to becoming places predominantly used for socializing after the war, the café culture in Beirut is dying. He writes, finally, that the new cafés “indicate a decline of taste and uniqueness, the emptiness of the city, and the loss of modernity even though they are all new [...] The cafés that were once the beauty benchmarks of the capital became today a simple platform for gossiping and observing the pedestrians.”⁶ Abu-Fakhir’s article implies that contemporary café culture is a weaker component of the city’s civil society than it once was.

The core meaning of civil society is that it “designates those social organizations, associations and institutions that exist beyond the sphere of direct supervision and control of the state.”⁷ Jürgen Habermas’ theory⁸ on the public sphere uses the early modern café, from the 17th

⁶ Abu-Fakhir, Sakr, ed. “The cultural coffee shops: Beirut, the boost of modern literature.” *Al-Quds Al-Arabia*. 15 July, 2002. pp. 3

⁷ Friedmann, John. “The New Political Economy of Planning: The Rise of Civil Society.” *Cities For Citizens: Planning and the Rise of Civil Society in a Global Age*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998. pp. 21

⁸ Habermas, a German philosopher (1929-), is very much influenced by ideas from the European Enlightenment and

and 18th centuries, as an example of a place that constructed civil society. According to Habermas, civil society is created by individuals "having a free, voluntary, and active membership"⁹ that is produced in the public sphere, where by private individuals engage in "rational discussion"¹⁰ "on public moral and political issues."¹¹ Habermas identifies a specific group of people in the cafés as the *modern public*,¹² differentiating them from other groups who frequented and socially interacted in cafés. The *modern public* is a self-organized entity that is composed of a "relation among strangers,"¹³ independent of kinship-ties, laws, or bureaucratic order, whose members are united by their participation in shared activities that revolve around common discourses that are based on temporal texts, such as newspapers and periodicals.¹⁴ Habermas looked to western European society in this theory, and so "the bourgeois public sphere was implicitly, even explicitly, white, male, literate, and propertied."¹⁵

In a café the *modern public* can express and exchange ideas and opinions, and participants of this exchange can evaluate, change or modify their ideas and opinions, a process that Habermas calls *communicative action*. Steven Seidman explains this process as follows:

Communicative action refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or extra verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of *interpretation* refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus [and] language is given a prominent place in this model.¹⁶

The theory on *communicative action* in this analysis on café culture is the link between social

does not look to eastern societies, including Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire experienced an age of enlightenment in the 19th century with the Ottoman tanzimaat, the introduction of the printing press, and the rise of nationalism.

⁹ Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2005. pp. 89

¹⁰ Seidman, Steven, ed. *Jurgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. pp. 232

¹¹ Seidman, pp. 21

¹² Warner, pp. 165

¹³ Warner, pp. 74

¹⁴ Warner, pp. 96

¹⁵ Warner, pp. 165

¹⁶ Seidman, pp. 143

engagement in cafés and political engagement in the city. The café is a public space that gives the *modern public* an opportunity to engage in the political life of the city, and gives them the potential to affect broader political and social conditions in the city.

In my research, I found that café culture in Beirut in the 17th and 18th centuries falls under Habermas' definition of the public sphere, where a *modern public* engages in communicative action and a strong civil society is formed. Café culture from the 19th century to the present falls outside the bounds of Habermas' theory, as he argues that the bourgeois public sphere began to crumble in the 19th century,¹⁷ and mass culture and consumerism¹⁸ and the *mass public* rose in its place.¹⁹ Despite the introduction of mass culture and mass consumerism, I argue that the public sphere in Beirut continues, but in a new way that accommodates the changing needs of society and adapts to new spaces for social interaction, such as the internet.

The public sphere as exemplified by cafés in Beirut is different from public spheres in other Arab cities because Lebanon has a history as an open and liberal country. Most Arab countries are ruled by conservative political systems and are regulated by social norms that prohibit people from public expression. Lebanon, on the other hand, allows freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Often, political and social unrest in other Middle Eastern countries created conditions that made it especially difficult or dangerous for people in those countries to speak out, and many sought refuge in Beirut. In Lebanon, unlike in other Arab countries, women also are free to participate and engage in public life; they dress as they please, go to the movies or any public place they choose, and go out to cafés.

Café culture in Lebanon is shaped by the free and open nature of this society in spite of the political conflicts, and the city's heterogeneous resident population and the mix of people

¹⁷ Johnson, Pauline. Habermas Rescuing the Public Sphere. New York: Routledge, 2006. pp. 28

¹⁸ Johnson, pp. 29, 169

¹⁹ Johnson, pp. 28

from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe who study, visit or work in Beirut. Despite common conceptions of people who have not spent time in a Beirut café, it is common to see people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds in a café.

My research methods for this paper are twofold: First, I draw on my experiences living and studying in Beirut, particularly time spent in cafés with friends and family and research on cafés that I conducted last summer (2007). Second, I draw on literature that is primarily in the form of periodicals and books in Arabic on cafés and the history of the Middle East, as well as pictures and documentaries. There is surprisingly little literature specifically on cafés. I rely primarily on Shawki Adduwaihi's book, *The Popular Cafés of Beirut from 1950-1990*, and Sakr Abu-Fakhir's article, "The Cultural Coffee Shops: Beirut, the Boost of Modern Literature."

This thesis, then, uses Habermas' framework to review café culture and to ask if cafés still serve the function of empowering civil society by presenting a public space for progressive social interactions. To answer this question the thesis is divided into three chapters: In Chapter I, I provide a brief historical background on cafés in the Ottoman Empire (1516-1917), and then on the affects of the French mandate on Beirut (1917-1946). In Chapter II, I discuss the modern café culture (1940's-1975), which grew out of the city's economic boom that was largely created by regional political factors. I will also touch on the destructive effects of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) on civilian life and café culture. In Chapter III, I describe contemporary cafés and their supportive role in reconstructing civil society. In conclusion, I aim to show that Habermas' theory validates the significance of early café culture (16th-20th centuries) to building civil society, but it fails to recognize that later café culture (20th -21st centuries) continues to serve the function of empowering civil society in the changing conditions of the city.

Chapter I: Historical Background

The Origin of Ottoman Cafés

The origin of cafés is unclear because sources differ, though evidence suggests that they originated in Yemen, a major producer and exporter of coffee beans.²⁰ In the 17th century Yemen began to export coffee through its port city of Mokha to Cairo.²¹ Merchants in Cairo sold coffee to merchants in Istanbul, Beirut and other cities around the Mediterranean Sea. Following the introduction and spread of coffee throughout the Ottoman Empire, cafés began to open. Cafés were more than places where people bought and sold coffee, served food and water pipes. They were public meeting places where people discussed, debated and argued about issues of political and social relevance.²² There are no photographs or thorough descriptions of cafés in my research, but I imagine that they were one room establishments with seating areas that sometimes extended onto the street or sidewalk.²³

In 1554 Hakam al-Halabi and Shams Addimashki, both Syrians, opened the first café of the Ottoman Empire²⁴ in Istanbul on Takhta Khalaa Street near the Sultan's Topkapi Palace.²⁵

More cafés opened in Istanbul and throughout the empire in the following years. According to

Abu-Fakhir:

When the number of coffee shops [in Istanbul] increased in 1558, Sheikh al-Islam Abu al-Saud advised the Sultan to close them down because they turned into clubs for intellectuals who argued about the bad government and openly criticized the Sultan. Consequently, and like his ancestors, the Sultan Mourad IV issued, in the early 17th century, his famous edict which stipulated that all those who drank coffee or smoked tobacco or smoked opium are to be executed.²⁶

²⁰ Some sources say that cafés originated in Yemen, while others say it originate in Ethiopia.

²¹ Hourani, Albert. A History of the Arab Peoples. New York: Harvard University Press, 1991. pp. 236

²² Seidman, pp. 21

²³ Pictures and documentaries about Beirut during the Ottoman period support my conjecture.

²⁴ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 1

²⁵ Abu Fakhir. Takhta Khalaa means Wooden Castle in Turkish.

²⁶ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 2

The Ottoman system of government and land rights produced a sharp divide in Ottoman society. It was divided into two distinct classes: the rulers, government personnel, religious men, and soldiers (*asker*), and the common people (*reaya*), peasants, merchants and all other subjects.²⁷ The *askers* had many privileges, including exemption from taxes, while the *reaya* worked to support them with their labor and taxes. The great disparities between the two classes lead to widespread unrest and rebellion by the *reaya*.²⁸ The Sultan felt threatened by the public meetings that happened in cafés because they “[served] as the point where talk exploded in action.”²⁹ Though this is true, the Sultan used the edict as a threat and did not close down cafés.

Vilayat Beirut

Literature on the history of café culture during the Ottoman period is scarce, though history books and articles on the city mention that many cafés existed in downtown Beirut. In the Arab world at that time only men went to cafés, while women stayed at home or socialized in private spaces. Cafés functioned as a meeting place for men to socialize over a cup of coffee, a water pipe, a game of backgammon or cards, and as a place for business or trade, as a location at which to seek employment, as a post office, and as a place for entertainment.

The political history of Beirut is important to contextualize those cafés and to understand later café culture. In the Ottoman era Beirut was the capital city of *vilayat*³⁰ Beirut, which comprised the city of Beirut, most of present day Lebanon, coastal regions of present day Syria, and the Galilee in northern Palestine (see figure 2). The neighboring two *vilayat* of Syria and Egypt were important to the Ottoman government because they produced high tax revenues for

²⁷ Hourani, pp. 219

²⁸ Hourani, pp. 219

²⁹ Hourani, pp. 238

³⁰ *Vilayat Beirut* means the Ottoman state of Beirut.

the central government, and because the annual pilgrimage to Mecca passed through Damascus and Cairo, respectively.³¹ *Vilayat Beirut*, on the other hand, was far less significant.

In the 16th century the city of Beirut was a small, walled town with seven gates, called *bab*, which were shut and locked each night.³² In the confines of the wall, the streets were sinuous and narrow, probably wide enough for two packed animals to pass side by side. There were suqs where textiles, vegetables, gold, fish and other merchandise was bought and sold, public bathhouses, churches, mosques, government buildings, and khans where one might spend the night. Khans were often located near a bathhouse, a place for worship and a transportation center, which would have been the place where people parked their caravans.³³ I infer from Abu-Fakhir's article that in the 17th and 18th centuries cafés were located inside the walled city.

In the 19th century Beirut's population and city limits grew. "In fact, the most definitive symptoms of urbanization – rural exodus and the spill of the population beyond its medieval walls – did not really appear in any substantial form until the 1860s."³⁴ A large influx of refugees from Mount Lebanon fled to Beirut following the war of 1860, between the Druze and the Maronites, two religious sects that historically rivaled one another for power.³⁵ The Ottoman government expanded the city beyond the confines of its walls and a new locus of social, economic and political life emerged on the eastern side beyond the city wall, in a large open space that later became known as Martyrs' Square.³⁶ This space, which at the time had no name,

³¹ Hourani, pp. 226

³² Khalaf, Samir. *The Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj*. London: Saqi. 2006, pp. 56

³³ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 2

³⁴ Khalaf, pp 21

³⁵ Khalaf, pp. 21

³⁶ Vale & Campanella. *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*. "A Vital Void Reconstructions of Downtown Beirut." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. pp. 289

was where trade caravans gathered and organized prior to entering the city.³⁷ “Given the density of the inner city and the rapid pace of development to its east and south, [Martrys’] square soon emerged as the center of business and transportation activity in the town.”³⁸ It further developed when the Ottomans transformed it into a public garden and built the Petite Serial³⁹ on its northern perimeter (1884).⁴⁰ At the same time, the Ottomans improved the infrastructure in downtown by widening the old city roads, installing gaslights, water networks, and building an electric tramway. They also built monuments such as Beirut’s Train Station, the Grand Serail and the Ottoman Bank.⁴¹ All of these developments helped Beirut become a major port on the eastern Mediterranean and therefore attract many visitors, who spent time in cafés.⁴²

While Beirut was an Ottoman *vilayat*, Lebanese from within the modern nation-state and people from other parts of the modern nation-states of Syria and Palestine came to the city because it was the center for government, business, trade, education, health care, and entertainment. Travelers to Beirut came on foot or on horseback and having completed a long and tiring journey they would stay for a few days or even weeks. The café was one public place where travelers would meet with friends or business associates, where they might seek work, or pass the time pleurably.

The French Mandate Period

To understand the changes in café culture, we must understand the political context of Beirut during this time. Lebanon fell under the rule of the French in 1917 through the Sykes-

³⁷ During World War I, as Arab nationalism was rising against the Ottoman rule, the local governor hanged six Lebanese Nationalists in this open public garden, and it henceforth became known as Martrys’ Square. A large bronze statue in the middle of the space commemorates the event. Vale and Campanella, pp. 289

³⁸ Vale and Campanella, pp. 289

³⁹ The Small Government Palace

⁴⁰ Khalaf, pp. 63

⁴¹ Khalaf, pp. 63

⁴² Vale and Campanella, pp. 289

Picot agreement between France and Great Britain that drew new borders in the Middle East.⁴³ Lebanon and Syria became mandates of France, Palestine and Iraq became mandates of Great Britain. The new Lebanon was smaller than *Vilayat* Beirut. Its borders excluded the Galilee in northern Palestine and the coastal strips of Syria.

The French and British did not consider the social, economic and political activity of people in the area when they drew these new borders. The creation of the nation states impacted Beirut because it lost its role as a capital of lands in Syria and Palestine. Travel and movement between these three countries initially continued as it was before, but in time, as people adjusted to the new nation states and as the roles and services of cities in each state, respectively, changed, the traffic patterns through Beirut also changed. The British mandate over Palestine made it especially difficult for Palestinians to travel to Beirut.

The French left their mark on the architecture and urban design of Beirut, as well as the café culture. One of their more significant contributions was building the Place de l'Etoile, a small round plaza with radiating streets that create the shape of a star (see image 6); it is located next to Martyrs' Square. In the early 20th century, cafés were primarily located in downtown, many in Martyrs' Square and the Place de L'Etoile. Cafés such as Patisserie Suisse and the Automatique, which opened in the mid-20th century and survived until the civil war, are reminiscent of the French influence.

The literature on the history of the Middle East and cafés in the Arab world within the scope of this paper does not provide physical descriptions of cafés in the Arab world before 1900. In my research I came across one framed colored etching of a café called Haj Daoud, which was built around 1900 near downtown Beirut.⁴⁴ It was the most famous café in the city at

⁴³ Hourani, pp. 318

⁴⁴ The etching is hanging in the living room of my house.

the turn of the 20th century. In the etching, the café appears to be built out of wood and bamboo and it sits on wooden stilts over the rocky coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It has a thatched roof, wooden sides open to the elements, chairs made out of bamboo and tables made out of wood. The sea is visible through the cracks in the café's floor planks. Boys dive off its edge to take a swim, while others sit on the rocks to fish.

Another picture from the 1920's is of a café called Farouk. The picture shows that Farouk occupied a small place along a downtown street (see figure 7).⁴⁵ Its large open doors are bordered by floor to ceiling glass windows. A sign with its name written in Arabic hangs over the entrance. The inside of the café is not clear from the picture, but it appears to be rather small. A man wearing a suit and smoking a water pipe is sitting outside the café on the right hand side of the door. On the other side, a shoeshine is kneeling on the ground to polish another man's shoes. Barbers and shoe-shiners often provided their services at cafés, or near the premises.⁴⁶ In the evenings, café patrons could stay to listen to the traveling storyteller or comedian, the *karakouz*.⁴⁷ Beirut's café culture is rooted in the Ottoman and French Mandate periods and since then it has expanded and changed in other parts of the city.

⁴⁵ Khalaf, pp. 178

⁴⁶ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 1

⁴⁷ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 4

Chapter II: Pre-War Cafés Culture

Independence and the Era of Prosperity (1943-1975)

The culture of socializing and working in cafés, which began in historic cafés, became an intrinsic and irreplaceable characteristic of Beirut society. My fascination with café culture begins with my grandparents' stories about cafés in Ras Beirut in 1950's and 1960's. My grandfather did not spend much time in sidewalk cafés, but since his office was so busy with clients, he transformed his lobby into a café, offering clients Turkish coffee and cigarettes. Political activists, businessmen and professionals from all over the Arab world who came to consult with my grandfather met in that café and interacted with one another, fostering social networks. My grandmother met her friends in sidewalk cafés for coffee in the morning or afternoon.

Café culture was at the heart of the vibrant social and political life that flourished in Beirut. During that time the city physically developed and its population increased with the influx of immigrants and refugees who were escaping the unstable political situations in neighboring countries. These changes supported the rise of modern cafés in Ras Beirut and Raouche, where political activists, intellectuals, artists, journalists and locals spent time. This chapter contextualizes the discussion on those cafés through an overview of the political changes in the country, and then gives examples of some popular cafés.

Political Changes and Urban Growth

In 1943 Lebanon gained independence from France. A National Pact was established as a verbal agreement between the Maronite leader Bishara al-Khoury and the Sunni leader Riad al-Solh.⁴⁸ These two religious sects historically disagreed on their visions for a Lebanese state and

48 Maila, J. "The Document of National Understanding: A Commentary." Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies, 1992.

created the pact to confirm the Arab identity of Lebanon, and divide government posts according to the sectarian makeup of the population. In order to foster the creation of a national identity, the Maronites renounced their special protection from Europe and the Sunnis renounced their special ties with other Arab states. It was the first step towards creating a stable, democratic government, but Lebanon never achieved the stability that its founders envisioned because of regional and local conflicts and instabilities.

Downtown Beirut remained a center for business, trade and government, but its physical layout changed. A French planner, Michel Ecochard, created new plans for downtown in the 1950's and from these plans the Lebanese government built bypass roads north of downtown.⁴⁹ The roads accommodated the “need to create an open network of circulation between the city's main port and airport, bypassing the city center and its main square in order to quickly mobilize the troops in the event of an Axis invasion.”⁵⁰ These and other roads took the place of downtown as a transportation hub and planted the seed for urban decentralization.

Ras Beirut, west of downtown, significantly developed in the latter half of the twentieth century and became a commercial and business center. A study by Dr. Samir Khalaf and Dr. Per Kongstad reveals the distribution of establishments in Ras Beirut, in the context of Lebanon as a whole.

[In 1973] with roughly not more than 2 % of the country's population, *Ras Beirut* has nearly 18% of Lebanon's engineers, and almost 13% of its hospitals [...], nearly 18% of all government ministries, 24% of all embassies and consulates, 23% of travel agencies, and 18% of all hotels and cinemas.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Vale and Campanella, pp. 290

⁵⁰ Vale and Campanella, pp. 290

⁵¹ Khalaf, Samir, and Per Kongstad. Hamra of Beirut: A Case of Rapid Urbanization. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973. pp. 29

Its physical development and its development as a center for intellectual and political activities are largely attributed to the presence of the American University of Beirut (AUB).⁵²

[Ras Beirut] served as a focal point for intelligentsia whose members were at the forefront of Arab nationalism and other political-ideological movements in the region. The district was an important hub for literary and publishing activities that made Beirut the center of the Arabic-language free press. Finally, the concentration of students, writers, journalists, academics, and radicals in Ras Beirut meant that the area enjoyed an atmosphere of social permissiveness (marked in part by the mixing of sexes) not seen in most Arab cities.⁵³

The influx of Palestinian refugees to Hamra Street in the late 1940's after the creation of the state of Israel also contributed to its growth. Hamra Street is a straight, relatively wide thoroughfare that measures about one kilometer, lined with shops, restaurants, offices, apartment buildings and cafés for the upper and middle classes. It is located nearby AUB (see figure 5). Some say that Hamra Street was built by Palestinians.

Hamra Street Cafés

The rise of sidewalk cafés and cinemas on Hamra Street happened around the same time, in the 1940's and 1950's. The proximity of cafés to cinemas such as Eldorado Cinema, Hamra Cinema, Strand, and Colisee gave people a place to meet and chat before or after the show.

More importantly, cafés on Hamra Street were meeting places for politicians, local and regional, literary people, including poets, philosophers, writers, journalists, artists and academics, both Arab and non-Arab. The cafés brought together a cross section of the local and Arab population, with a clientele that is different from the clientele of downtown cafés. Among the notable people who patronized Hamra Street cafés were the founders of the Ba'ath Party, the Muslim Brotherhood leaders, the Arab Nationalist intellectuals, the Syrian Socialist Party

⁵² Abu-Fakhir, pp. 6

⁵³ Nagal, Caroline. "Reconstructing space, re-creating memory: sectarian politics and urban development in post-war Beirut." *Political Geography*. 2002. pp. 719

leaders, Nasserites, Communists, and supporters of traditional monarchical regimes.⁵⁴ Amjad Naser, who spent time in the old Hamra Street cafés said (1996), “The plans for revolutions and major political changes in neighboring countries took place at [those cafés].”⁵⁵ The cafés were the heart of political activity for the entire region. They were patronized by both men and women. Women “who patronized these cafés described themselves as ‘free women’ *nisa’a mutaharirrat* who were able to take complete responsibility for their behavior.”⁵⁶ Women’s socializing in the public space of cafés signifies changes in café culture as well as broader changes in Beirut society.

The Horseshoe, founded by Munah Dabaghi in 1959, was one “intellectual” sidewalk café on Hamra Street (see figure 8).⁵⁷ It was frequented by Unsi al-Haj, a writer and poet, Raymond Jbara, a theatre producer, Rafic Sharaf, a poet, Munah al-Soloh, a writer, Nidal al-Ashkar, an actress and activist, Juliana Sarufin, a writer, Ghada al-Samman, a publisher, and Paul Geragosian, a Lebanese-Armenian painter. The Horseshoe was a place for liberal thought and political discussions. In 1969 when the Lebanese authorities prohibited a progressive theatre group, Majdalyoun, from hosting a play called “Henri Hamati,” its lead actor, Nidal al-Ashkar, performed the show on the sidewalk outside of Horseshoe.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, this splendid café shut down with the outbreak of the civil war. It changed hands to become a shabby fast food outlet called Abu Nawas and more recently it was turned into Costa, an international chain.

While Anglophiles met at Horseshoe, French educated people met at Express.⁵⁹ Express opened in the early 1970’s. It was a quiet place located on the basement level of a mid rise

⁵⁴ Maurice Khoury

⁵⁵ Sawalha, Aseel. “From French Cafés to Funeral Homes: Remembering Spaces of the Pas in Beirut.” Remembering the Good Old Days: The Reconstruction of Urban Space in Postwar Beirut. Unpublished book manuscript. pp. 134

⁵⁶ Sawalha, pp. 134

⁵⁷ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 4

⁵⁸ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 4

⁵⁹ Maurice Khoury

building off of Hamra Street. Its clientele were also writers, poets and students. When the Horseshoe closed down, many of its clientele chose to patronize Express.

Modca, which opened on Hamra Street on January 1, 1970 to replace Negresco café, was another popular Hamra Street café . Other notable cafés on Hamra Street were Café de Paris, which still exists today with its orange awnings and multicolored chairs, the Strand café, the Congress café, Eldorado café and the Café de la Presse.⁶⁰ “These cafés were remembered where Beirut’s intelligentsia, women and men engaged in intellectual and political debated while they consumed Western beverages such as espresso, instant coffee, tea made from tea bags, along with Western desserts, rather than the local beverages and snacks served in the *maqha*, the traditional coffeehouse.”

Bliss Street Cafés

Horseshoe on Hamra Street and Faisal’s restaurant on Bliss Street were often frequented by Syrian poets such Youssef al-Khal, Adonis, Mohamad al-Maghout, Nathir al-Azma, and Fouad Rafka who founded a magazine of modern poetry.

According to Dr Kamal Bekhaazi, the clientele of Faisal restaurant consisted of professors, university students, politicians such as the Arab and Syrian nationalists, Baathists, as well as Battalions like Makram Atieh, in addition to some personalities like Georges Habash, Constantin Zureik and many others [...] Mohamad Sabagh Al Hawari said that Faisal restaurant was a place for eating and talking politics. As for the girls, they used to meet in Uncle Sam café.⁶¹

Faisal’s was founded by Tawfik Saade around 1919. It was located opposite AUB’s Main Gate and along the old trolley line coming up from downtown. Its customers included high ranking Lebanese and Syrian political figures, literary people, professors and students from AUB. Faisal’s closed on June 30, 1978, another casualty of the Lebanese civil war. Uncle Sam’s, also

⁶⁰ See Appendix

⁶¹ Al-Atrash, Rasha. “Universities, cafés, libraries: the ‘mixture’ of sects and ideas... ‘Ras Beirut’ dares for pluralism.” *Assafir*. 13 March, 2007. pp. 3

on Bliss Street, catered to AUB students and represented American culture; it introduced the hamburger to the everyday menu.

Parallel to Bliss Street is Makhoul Street, where the artist Georges al-Zaani owned and operated the Smugglers Inn restaurant. In the area around AUB, framed by Makhoul Street, Jean D'Arc and Bliss Streets, artistic and cultural activities took place in the open air. However, after the kidnapping of Georges al-Zaani and the devastation of the Smugglers Inn during the civil war, this small neighborhood became totally lifeless. Georges al-Zaani tried to reinvigorate the neighborhood and opened Elissar, an art gallery, but that was short lived.⁶²

Seaside Cafés

Raouche is the westernmost part of Ras Beirut. The famous Pidgeon Rocks sit majestically just offshore (see figure 9). Raouche developed in the mid 1950's and early 1960's to become one of the most fashionable places to live. Along the coast are numerous cafés built on or below street level and overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The seaside cafés remained, in general, places for smoking water pipes and enjoying the sea breeze.

The Dolce Vita, located in Raouche, was established by Seif al-Din Khawaja and his partner Abd al-Maati Shahin, both from Syria. At night the cafe was frequented by political leaders and exiles such as Michel Aflak, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, Akram al-Hourani, Roshdi al-Kikhia, Ali Saleh al- Saadi, Munah al-Soloh, Mohamad Ahmad al-Mahjoub, the founder of the Nadama society Zouheir al-Saadawi, and many others. This café was also the destination for the Lebanese, Egyptian and Syrian government intelligence services because of its clientele.⁶³ Dolce Vita closed with the outbreak of the civil war.

⁶² Abu-Fakhir, pp. 4

⁶³ Abu-Fakhir, pp. 4

The Lebanese Civil War

The Lebanese civil war began on April 13, 1975 and continued until 1990. For fifteen years Beirut was ravaged by vicious guerilla fighting between groups of different religious and political beliefs. The city was divided into two distinct areas by an invisible “green line,” which ran through the center of downtown all the way to the National Museum and further to the hills east of Beirut. Beirut’s downtown was at the heart of the fighting from 1975-1976 and its old suqs, cafés, bathhouses, cinemas, and government buildings were almost completely destroyed. A large scale invasion by Israel in 1982 added fuel to the fighting and destroyed the south of Lebanon and much of Beirut.

Throughout the course of the war the socio-demographic makeup of Beirut changed. Many Christians who lived in West Beirut moved to the eastern part of the city and Muslims in East Beirut moved to the western part of the city. Businesses had to close or relocate and in their places sprouted informal shops and sidewalk bazaars, selling looted household goods, books, and clothing. Looters and squatters were also rampant. Cafés opened in Achrafiyeh and Gemayze, in east Beirut, and Verdun, south of Hamra Street because they were less targeted in the fighting.

In 1990 the various parties met in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia, to come to an agreement in order to end hostilities in Lebanon.⁶⁴ After weeks of deliberations by Members of the Lebanese Parliament and a host of prominent politicians and government functionaries, especially from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, an agreement was established. The Ta’if Agreement settled the sectarian problems as well as the political problems and prepared the country for a new phase in its history. It gave Christians and Muslims equal representation in the parliament and equal share in the main administrative jobs. The Ta’if, however, does not seem to be working and the

⁶⁴ “Ta’if Accord.” <<http://www.mideastinfo.com/documents/taif.htm>>.

hostilities now prevailing in Lebanon are in fact the aftermath of an agreement that was not comprehensive enough to survive.

The changed demographic, physical, political and social conditions of Beirut after the war are reflected in its café culture. Shawki Adduwaihi's article articulates this point by saying, "The café reflects the conditions of the city as well as the conditions of the street in which it is located [...] the transformation of the café is related to the transformation of the city, whether in war or peace."⁶⁵ Once a new pattern of life was established and the chaos was less intimidating, people were able to open businesses within the new norms. Civil order was slowly reestablished and Ras Beirut eventually regained its previous role.

⁶⁵ Adduwaihi, Shawki, and Najem Shawki. "The popular cafes of Beirut: a book review of Shawki Adduwaihi's book." *Annahar*. 15 January, 2006. pp. 2

Chapter III: Contemporary Café Culture

Post-War Era (1990-2007)

Contemporary café culture is a blend of pre-war cafés and new cafés that are both international chains and local establishments. The number of cafes, and the expanded clientele and services that they provide are indicative of their invigorated role. Since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, the disagreements and tensions that sparked the fighting, and then changed and developed throughout the course of the war were not resolved by the Ta'if Agreement. This turn of events and the ensuing disappointments impacted the concept of the café and the need for the space it provides. Instead of minimizing its value, it apparently made it more of a necessity. It is evident that during the past seventeen years, when the country experienced periods of relative calm and periods of inflamed political tensions and instability, the café stood its ground and in fact came back in force. The value of cafés to society increases in times of political tension and instability.

Abu-Fakhir argues that contemporary cafés are “a simple platform for gossiping and observing the pedestrians” and he indicates that they are mainly sites for consumerism, but this is not supported by my research. The public sphere is flexible and, in Beirut, it adapts to the changing needs of society after the experiences and changes that the country went through in the past decades. Contemporary cafés serve a multiplicity of roles. They host art exhibits, music performances, movie screenings, and events for socially or politically active groups. They also serve as study lounges, night clubs and places for people to escape the daily pressures of life. Given that no other public space or institution, barring institutions of higher learning and a few private clubs, provide this diversity of functions and services, cafés are vitally important to civil society.

This chapter will show that the public sphere is flexible, as it adapts to satisfy the changing needs of people and the society in which they express their ideas and concerns. I will examine contemporary café culture with examples of popular post-war cafés, and then talk about the place of pre-war cafés in post-war Beirut and finally return to downtown Beirut, where the café culture first emerged. I draw heavily on my past experiences visiting Beirut over summer breaks (1986-2005) and living in Beirut last year (September 2006 – August 2007).

ta-Marbouta

The word ta-marbouta is actually a letter in the Arabic alphabet, approximating to a lowercase T. The café opened on September 13, 2006, which was “just shy of two-months past the target, but [it] functioned as a relief center during the [July 2006] war.”⁶⁶ Ta-marbouta is co-owned by a Palestinian and a Lebanese who both lived in the United State during the Lebanese civil war and recently returned.

Their café fosters lively social interactions and allows for engagement in issues of social and political relevance. Recently, on November 29, 2007, ta-marbouta hosted an event to mark the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, organized by the Tourath Baladna Social Communication Center and ta-marbouta.⁶⁷ “The gathering attracted mostly youth who enjoyed a tasty snack buffet, listened to Palestinian music presented by singer Ashraf, and watch short films by young Palestinian filmmakers. Anni Kanafani [...] showed an exhibition of paintings by children from Palestinian refugee camps.”⁶⁸ The event was hosted at the café, not another public venue, suggesting that cafés are a prominent public space.

⁶⁶ Ohrstrom, Lysandra. “Influx of new businesses alters commercial dynamic of Hamra.” *The Daily Star*. 9 Feb 2007. pp. 1

⁶⁷ Schoenlebe, Dirk. “Popular Beirut café hosts young crowd to mark Day of Solidarity with Palestinians.” *The Daily Star*. Dec. 1, 2007. pp. 1

⁶⁸ Shoenlebe, pp. 1

Every Wednesday at 8 p.m. ta-marbouta hosts a movie night. The owners show documentaries and films with a political or social message. Movie nights attract a variety of people who bring with them a broad range of opinions. In fact, ta-marbouta's location in the neighborhood of Hamra, which is a mixed Christian and Muslim neighborhood, and its close proximity to AUB, helps it attracts students, professors, foreigners, and locals. With this diverse crowd, the time after movie screenings can spark lively debates, arguments, and discussions.

Habermas might argue that movies are precisely an icon of contemporary mass culture, and that the movie audience makes up a mass public, all absorbing the same message from the same movie.⁶⁹ My research shows this is not the case in Beirut. The movie may be what draws people to the café on a Wednesday night, when they could easily stay at home to watch a movie, television or read a book, but what brings them to the café is their desire to be with other people. Moreover, movies are the “temporal texts” of today, as newspapers were the “temporal texts” of the 17th and 18th centuries. Movie screenings at ta-marbouta, and at other cafés, show that cafés have adapt to new modes of communication and social interaction.

Social interactions that begin in the café itself go well beyond its physical space. While I was conducting my research on café culture over the past summer, I focused the data collection on newspapers and books, and did not conduct formal interviews with people. However, ta-marbouta enthusiasts created a group on facebook.com that tells about their views on the café. The group profile page describes it as a “Cultural meeting place/ progressive café pub,” and it advertises the Wednesday night movie screening.⁷⁰ In Beirut, ta-marbouta has a reputation for being a liberal and progressive establishment.

⁶⁹ Johnson, pp. 29

⁷⁰ Facebook. <<http://www.facebook.com>>.

The design of the café itself reflects the owners' effort to make it an inviting, comfortable, convenient and exciting place for people to spend time. Outside the front door there is a blackboard that "posts listings about gallery openings, music shows, and opportunities for activism."⁷¹ As one enters the café, there is a small room on the right that is called the library (see figures 11). It has a long table and chairs, built in bookshelves with a collection of books and magazines, and a couch against the back wall with a large window over it, making the room bright and pleasant. The owners stay up with technology and provide an internet hotspot at the café. Bilal al-Amine, one of the co-owners, expressed his opinion on the post-war cafés in Beirut to a reporter from the English language daily newspaper, *The Daily Star*:

The old cafés have been in decline for a long time. ta-Marbouta is part of the new generation of Hamra café culture. I think it's probably because rents on the main street are too difficult for a place where people don't order much and sit around all day. It's not really feasible anymore. Also things have changed since the Civil War. We offer the Internet.⁷²

The main room is much bigger than the library, and it has a bar, comfortable couches and chairs, low stools, and higher wooden tables that work well for people who want to eat a meal (see figure 10). The menu lists sandwiches, French fries, hummus, kebabs, pastries, coffee, tea, and alcohol. Backgammon, chessboards, and decks of cards are set on a table for anyone to use. I spent many winter nights at ta-marbouta practicing my chess skills.

The social networks in Beirut are very small, and it is not unusual to run into classmates, neighbors or professors at cafés. Actually it is to be expected to see many familiar faces or run into acquaintances in any public space: the sidewalk, the vegetable market, the pharmacy, the café.

⁷¹ Ohrstrom, pp. 1

⁷² Ohrstrom, pp. 1

At the end of the summer, a week before I left Beirut to return to the U.S., one of my friends, Lean, who had been away on an internship with an architecture firm in Europe called me to catch up before I travel. We decided to meet at ta-marbouta, one of her favorite cafés and a convenient meeting point for me as it is close to my house. At the café she told me about the beautiful architecture in Europe, the impressive cleanliness and order of the city – she was particularly impressed by the bike lanes that are on a different level than the street and sidewalk. I told her about my summer research, my Arabic lessons, and my visit to the city of Tripoli in the north of Lebanon. We had met in an urban theory course, she and I studied for tests together and talked about issues related to the city, and by the second semester we could finally joke about the time we finally began to understand Lefebvre’s theory on *The Production of Space*. Those conversations continued in the café.

Later that evening, a professor who teaches modern architecture at AUB came to ta-marbouta with a graduate student from New York, who was in Beirut for the summer. Lean knows that professor from the architecture department and soon he and the graduate student pulled their little table and two stools next to ours and joined our conversation. I was very excited about this unplanned meeting because I had really hoped to take that professor’s course, but it conflicted with another class. We finally met in this relaxed, informal setting, and I had the opportunity to ask him all about modern architecture in Beirut, and his time spent in the U.S. and Europe and his current research on Beirut. The graduate student and I exchanged e-mails in case we were to meet in the U.S.

Bardo

Bardo is another popular café that opened in 2006. Its movie night is on Sunday. It shows classics, documentaries and box-office hits, and like at ta-marbouta, there is a post-movie discussion. Since Bardo is located right next to Haigazian University, an Armenian institution,

and it is in the mixed neighborhood of Ras Beirut, it attracts Armenians, locals, foreigners. It also has a reputation for attracting gays. There is a regular crowd of students from Haigazian and AUB who go there on weekday and weekend nights. This mix of people bring with them a diversity of ideas and opinions that they can exchange in post-movie discussions, one formal forum for them to debate and discuss, yet because the social networks in Beirut are so small it is likely that at any time some patrons will know each other.

While ta-marbouta serves meals, provides game boards, wireless internet and a study space, Bardo is more of a café/restaurant/bar. Its funky interior design, alternative music and creative food presentations make it a fun and interesting place to spend time. It is essentially one big room, but in the style of modern architecture, the space is partitioned into two “rooms” by a small wall, multi-level seating areas and a bar that wraps around from the main room to the back room. In the first room there are high round tables and stools, a bar with a counter and bar stools. The second room is to the right. Its multi-level seating area is composed of low tables and small stools on the floor. Behind them along one side of the room are two wooden platforms, one about two feet higher than the other, with pillows and sleek, small wooden tables. On the other wall there is a screen that plays movies, muted but with subtitles. These movies add to the atmosphere and ambiance of the place, but people do not usually watch them straight through. In my experience, the movie of the night serves as a good conversation piece when the conversation runs dry.

Costa & Starbucks

While Cost and Starbucks are large international chains, they lose much of their power in the context of Beirut’s café culture. Costa and a Starbucks are two blocks away from each other on Hamra Street. Like any Costa in London, New York or Paris, the Costa on Hamra Street has a maroon awning and its logo stamped on every coffee cup, plate and napkin. It serves French

croissants and American frappuccinos with syrup and whipped cream. It has a sidewalk seating area that looks into the interior space through the large floor to ceiling window (see figure 12). There are maroon chairs and round tables inside. In the middle of the room there is a spiral staircase that leads to a study room in the basement.

Like any Starbucks in Bryn Mawr, Boston, or Beijing, the Starbucks on Hamra Street has its green logo stamped all over the café and it serves mochas, chocolate chip cookies and bottled water. It has indoor and outdoor seating areas, couches, tables and chairs (see figure 13). Like Costa, it has a study room in the basement.

These two cafés could be seen as the epitome of the mass culture that Habermas describes in his theory. In a chapter of Pauline Johnson's book that explains and analyzes Habermas' book *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, she addressed the issue of mass culture, and writes:

The packaging of corporate interests that sought to influence rather than persuade was the conspicuous take of modern media industry that had both amplified and exploited the transformation of a public sphere from a setting of rational – critical debate into an arena for advertising. Publicity now became the tool of a media machine argumentation, but as passive consumers of messages which, utilizing strategies of repetition, seduction and disavowal, relied upon and reproduced relations of power.⁷³

Costa and Starbucks patrons, Habermas might argue, go to these cafés because they are lured in by the catchy logos and persuasive advertisements in magazines and on television that tell them that a mocha with whipped cream is the perfect way to warm up on a cold winter day. It would be irrational to discredit the power of advertisements and the media; the cozy, delightful images of Costa and Starbucks surely help them to attract patrons, however, to end the discourse there would be too simplistic. While advertisements may help Costa and Starbucks attract a lot of customers and make profits, the social interactions that happen in the cafés are valuable as well.

⁷³ Johnson, pp. 29

AUB students like to go to the study rooms in Costa and Starbucks for a change of scenery from the University library. Since the study room in Starbucks is much bigger and quieter than the study room in Costa, it tends to be more popular among students, especially during exam periods. There are a few big study tables, and one semi-private room, that are convenient for study groups.

City Café

City Café, opened by Munah Dabaghi who owned the famous Horseshoe on Hamra Street, is reminiscent of pre-war café culture. It is situated on the corner of a relatively busy street, one block away from the Lebanese American University. The large windows along one side the building and an outdoor balcony about five feet above the sidewalk are shaded by a large green awning. The inside space accommodates about fifty tables, and is usually decorated by the paintings or photographs of local artists. This is a service the café provides for young artists for free.

Every Wednesday morning at 10:30 my grandfather meets a group of friends at City Café. The group is called “the young men’s Wednesday meeting club;” my seventy six year old grandfather is the youngest member, and the other men are in their eighties and nineties. The group’s five core members are university educated and had careers in politics, business or academics. Their conversations are rich, lively and cover a wide spectrum of topics including the arts, the Arab and Islamic culture, poets and poetry, local news and politics.⁷⁴ Each person in the group brings interesting ideas or insights to the conversations - they seem to have private sources of information especially on politics in Lebanon, Jordan, the Gulf and Iraq. Politics in Lebanon may change from hour to hour, let alone from day to day, so every week there is always something for them to discuss.

⁷⁴ Maurice Khoury

The Middle East Airlines (MEA) group also meets at the City Café, every Wednesday morning at 10:00 a.m. The former executives, directors of the airline, former captains, gather once a week. Their group is composed of twelve individuals and the discussions center on local politics and the inside stories of the airline.

Pre-War Cafés in Post-War Beirut

Next to Costa on Hamra Street is Café de Paris, which looks the same today as it did thirty years ago. There are multi-colored chairs and small round tables in the outdoor seating area, which is covered by an awning with its name written in faded letters. The old men who are sitting there, drinking their coffee and smoking their cigarettes, are probably the same men who sat there during the fifties and sixties. The coffee is cheaper than at Costa, but young people prefer the later.

Since the end of the civil war, the popularity of Café de Paris has seriously declined. The Lebanese poet Shawki Bazzi, a regular at the Café de Paris, told a news reporter for *The Daily Star*, “I am not optimistic about Café de Paris because no young people come here so when we die, this place will die with us. Every year we lose another artist or poet.”⁷⁵ I never went into this café, since I noticed that almost any time I walked by, its customers were mostly older people.

Pre-war cafés are still valued by the generation that experienced pre-war café culture and by the younger generations. An AUB student wrote an article for the University’s newspaper about Modca café after it closed in 2003. He gave a romantic description of his experiences and thoughts in the café:

It’s Friday night, and I’m sitting in Modca Café on Hamra Street [...] At this table, as I engage in full-hearted political conversations and indulge in moral disagreements with my fellow colleagues and friends, I felt alive. For a brief moment, I dreamed of conquering the world [...] Modca Café closed down, yet it closes its door with flamboyant fashion. For years, this place has been the

⁷⁵ Ohrstrom, Lysandra. “Influx of new businesses alters commercial dynamic of Hamra.” *The Daily Star*. 9 Feb. 2007. pp. 1

breeding ground, the safe house, and the refuge of many great thinkers, politicians, writers, actors, journalists, and historians. A cornerstone of the great city of Beirut, Modca fades away into darkness after 36 years of loyal service.⁷⁶

The nostalgic tone of this student's article is representative of the tone of the majority of literature in my research on Beirut, whether about cafés, politics or history. Beirut's cityscape is marked by the damaging affects of the war, and pre and post war cafés are markers of the disconnect in time.

Downtown Cafés

Downtown Beirut was completely reconstructed after the civil war by a development company called Société Libanaise pour le Développement et Reconstruction de Centre Ville de Beyrouth (SOLIDERE). Martyrs' Square, Place de L'Etoile and Riad al-Solh are still its three main nodes. Almost 100 new cafés opened in the SOLIDERE area between 1997 and 2007 - they are located side by side along the sidewalks and spilled onto the pedestrian streets (see figure 14). Businesses in Downtown probably would have succeeded had it not been for a series of wars and conflicts, internal and regional. In December 2006 opposition groups to the government set up a tent city in large areas of Downtown, including Riad al-Solh Square. The government enclosed the tent city with barbed wire, to control and contain its growth and activities, and has soldiers and tanks positioned on its perimeter. Few customers want another reminder of conflict and avoid the downtown area, leaving cafés and restaurants with very little business, and most closed. Since the demonstration began, cafés on Hamra Street became markedly more crowded.

⁷⁶ Abdul Wahab, Afif. "The end of an era." *Outlook*. 4 Mar. 2003. pp. 1

Conclusion:

This thesis proves that café culture in Beirut is still a strong, vibrant and a necessary component of its civil society. Habermas' theory validates the significance of café culture during the Ottoman period to building civil society, yet it fails to recognize that café culture continues to serve the function of empowering civil society through the changing conditions of the city and the evolution of the public sphere. Indeed, the ramifications of café culture go well beyond the city.

A major critique of Habermas' theory is that he "idealizes the liberal public sphere [and] fails to examine other non liberal, non bourgeois, competing public spheres."⁷⁷ It is imperative to recognize that civil society is constructed by the many publics that exist in the same public sphere and that they are interrelated. In the Ottoman period the public was primarily composed of men - elite political activists and intellectuals as well as traders and ordinary workers from Lebanon and the region. In the pre-war era women joined café society, and so there were women's groups, as well as political activists and intelligentsia, students and others. In the post-war era there is the older generation of friends and business partners who meet in cafés, as well as the diverse younger generation, includes the bohemian, "lefties" who frequent ta-marbouta and Bardo, and foreigners, mainly the U.S. and Europe, artists, academics and other locals. Habermas "Oddly [...] stops short of developing a new, post-bourgeois model of the public sphere."⁷⁸ My research indicates that such a theory would help create a more comprehensive understanding of the public sphere and the construction of civil society through time.

This thesis, then, identifies the value of café culture and shows the need for more research on the topic. My findings could be developed and enriched by ethnographic studies in

⁷⁷ Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actual Existing Democracy." Calhoun, Craig, ed. Habermas and the Public Sphere. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996. pp. 115

⁷⁸ Fraser, pp. 111

Beirut. This could entail talking to people from the older generations to find out more about historic and pre-war cafés. A large body of literature on the pre-war era, however, exists in the form of memoirs, biographies, fiction and other accounts of history. I am interested in going beyond the civil war era because I find that literature on Beirut is mostly about those “glory days.” Many try to reconstruct memories and recover the past, and while this is certainly valuable, the value and necessity of post-war cafés to civil society in Beirut is not fully realized. This is in part due to the fact that the city is still recovering from the civil war and has not seen much stability in order to re-access the situation, yet café culture has certainly developed and flourished. Ethnographic research on new cafés could include quantitative studies on all Beirut cafés, and then detailed studies on individual cafés, finding out about their owners, their services, and their clientele. Then, if conditions allowed, finding out what people talk about and their opinions on issues of social and political relevance.

The multitude of cafés, the multitude of publics in cafés and the variety of functions and services that they offer leads to questions of the civil society and democracy building. “It has been argued that an effective way of making democracy stronger is to strengthen civil society.”⁷⁹ Further research could examine the relationship between civil society and Lebanon’s weak democratic government. Moreover, this leads to questions of how the café culture in Beirut would fit into a more holistic study on civil society in Beirut. Since the 16th century, the city has grown, the population has increased, and technology has advanced methods of communication and created more places for civil society to be cultivated. The chapter on contemporary café culture shows that the internet is another forum for social interactions and networking. Outside of cafés, there seem to be few public spaces in Beirut for people to meet and interact. Further

⁷⁹ Flyvbjerg, Bent. “Habermas and Foucault: Thinkers for Civil Society?” *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No. 2. June 1998. pp. 210

research could shed light on a broader understanding of the role of cafés in civil society. While this study raises additional questions, the primary conclusion is that as cafés have evolved from their earlier form, they are still a vital space for building civil society in Beirut.

This appendix provides additional information about cafés in downtown Beirut during the French mandate and pre-war eras, as well as information about cafés in Ras Beirut from the pre-war era. The primary source for the information is Sakr Abu Fakhir's "The Cultural Café: Pioneering Modern Literary Waves."

French Mandate

Haj Daoud: Haj Daoud was even a popular Friday destination for families from Damascus.

Two notable people who patronized Haj Daoud were the author of the Lebanese national anthem, Amin Nakhle, and a poet named Moustafa Faroukh, as did many other literary figures. In his article, Abu-Fakhir does not say whether or not they interacted or socialized with each other.

Based on my knowledge of Arab society and my own visits to cafés, I would be confident to say that individuals who have even a nodding acquaintance with each other would at some time engage in discussion in the small space of a café.

Al-Bahri: Al-Bahri café was located in the downtown near Haj Daoud. It attracted important personalities such as Sami Soloh, who served as prime minister of Lebanon five times (1942-43, 1945-46, 1952, 1954-55, and 1956-58), Abdallah Al-Yafi, who was prime minister of Lebanon for 12 terms between 1939 and 1969, Saliba Douaihy, a painter who live in America, Rashid Wehbe, a painter, Elias Abu Shabake, a poet, and Halim Damous (Christian) a poet.

Kawkab al-Shark: Kawkab al-Shark (Star of the East) was another café on Martyrs' Square, located in the second floor of a building its south side. The café's owner Abu Afif Kraydiye, was a "tough guys." In Beirut, "tough guys," who are called *abadayat* in Arabic are men who protector their neighborhood, or in the café of cafés, their patrons. Abu Afif also owned a café on

the level below Qawkab al-Sharq and it was a 24 hour operation. The poet Bishara al-Khoury, known as al-Akhtal al-Saghir after the Umayyad poet al-Akhtal, wrote the famous poem Ya Akida al-Hajibain in this café. In 1934 the café collapsed when Abu Afif began excavations for an expansion. It was said then: “How come a dish of foul [fava beans] destroy the planet!” Al-Arunda café opened in its place and became a favorite meeting place for the intelligentsia.

Parisian: The Parisian was the most important café on Martyrs’ Square. The only item on its menu was a locally produced dark red soft drink called Jallool. During the day the Parisian was a regular social meeting place. At night, however, it turned into a cabaret. Musicians and dancers entertained, or theatrical groups performed plays, or improvisational and politically satirical shows.

Azar: Azar café faced the Downtown police station, a short distance from the Parisian. It provided access to al-Mutanabi Street, the red light district of the time. Al-Mutanabi was a famous and beloved Arab poet and the red light district being named after him was considered a great insult.

Café Palestine: Café Palestine opened in 1936 and served water pipes, coffee and tea, and people played cards there. It was a favorite of the Iraqi poet Ahmad Assafi Annajafi.

Fatouh: Fatouh café was visited by al-Akhtal Assaghir and the poet Mohamad Kamel Shaib al-Amili who composed a poem of 143 verses, extolling the virtues of the pickles served in that café.

In addition to these cafés, there were many others that were short-lived, and others that were destroyed during the civil war. Among them were: al-Najjar café in Souk al-Sagha (gold market), al-Qizaz café in Gemmayze, al-Haj Reslan café in Riad al-Solh, Abu Metri café in Martyr's Square, Farouq café which was in competition with al-Kamal’s famous café in Damascus, Roxy's in the building of the Roxy cinema, Patisserie Suisse and the Automatique café and

restaurant. There were also the cafés of the *qabadayat* (bullies or tough guys) such as al-Basha, al-Haj Said Hamad in Basta, Doughan, Annabulsi, and al-Berjawi.

Pre-War Cafés

Express: Express was patronized by Abd al-Amir Abdallah, Safwan Haidar, Mohamad Kebbi, Adel Fakhoury, as well as some eccentric individuals like Botros Eid al-Dib, Kamel Sheib al-Amili, Haidar Saleh and Hani al-Zoebi.

Faisal: Faisal's was patronized by Kamel al-Asaad, former speaker of the house in Lebanon, Joseph Skaf, former minister in Lebanon and deputy of parliament, Issam al-Mahairi, Syrian politician, Abdallah Kobersi, a high ranking person in the Syrian Socialist Party, Inaam Raad, a high ranking person in the Syrian Socialist Party, Mohsen Ibrahim, Lebanese politician, Kamal Jumblat, founder of the Socialist party in Lebanon and the Druze leader, Walid Jumblat, son of Kamal and Member of Parliament and former Minister, Said Takiyi Eldeen, a Druze intellect, Nadim Dimashkieh, career diplomat of Lebanon, Georges Habash, founder of the Arab Nationalist Movement, Youssef al-Khal, a poet and publisher, Adonis, Khalil Hawi, a poet, Shafik al-Hout, former representative in Lebanon for the Palestinian Authority, Adel Oseiran, former minister and house speaker in Lebanon, Michel Abu Jawde, a journalist, Kamal Nasir, a Palestinian poet, Abd al-Mohsen Abu Mayzar, former information in-charge for the Palestinian Authority, Ali Fakhro, former minister of health in Bahrain, Ismail al-Azhari, Syrian politician, Saadoun Hamadi, former speaker of the house in Iraq, Abd al-Hamid Sharaf, former prime minister of Jordan, Kamal al-Salibi, historian and writer, and many others.

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