

**Research Seminar**  
**Institut français du Proche-Orient (Beirut) and CRESPPA-LabTop (Paris)**  
**In collaboration with AUB**

**Beirut intellectual worlds: figures, institutions, circulations (1958-2005)**

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This research seminar attempts to provoke a series of reflections on the intellectual worlds that were formed in Beirut in the second half of the twentieth century. Working across intersecting fields of research (the history and sociology of intellectuals, the social history of political ideas, cultural studies, etc.), we will focus on the historic role of Beirut as a cultural capital situated at the crossroads of various currents of transnational intellectual circulation. We will also focus on the Lebanese and Arab figures who have left a mark on Beirut's intellectual life, as well as the institutions, networks, and media outlets that organized the social production of ideas (newspapers, journals, publishing houses, cultural clubs, etc.).

**Presentation**

A meeting point for many Arab intellectuals, activists and artists from diverse backgrounds, Beirut was long considered along with Cairo, to be one of the cultural capitals of the Arab world. From the nineteenth century onwards, economic development of the port city, political transformations within the Ottoman Empire and European imperial and colonial policies made Beirut, the last-born of the provincial capitals, a laboratory for Ottoman experimentations with modernity (Kassir, 2003; Hanssen, 2005). A pioneer in press and in publishing (Mermier, 2002, 2005), Beirut became, along with Cairo, one of the main centers of the Nahda, the Arab "Renaissance" (Hourani, 1962; Gonzales-Quijano, 2007; Hanssen and Weiss, 2016; Makdisi, 2019). In the context of political, economic and cultural reconfigurations that the Middle East experienced from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, Cairo and Beirut (albeit the former more modestly than the latter) asserted themselves as the primary scenes of a particularly vivacious intellectual forthcoming within the Arab world.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Palestinian Nakba and the processes of nationalization in Lebanon's neighboring states made Beirut one of the main receivers and receptacles of both financial (Safieddine, 2019) and cultural capital, with Lebanon's relative political liberalism and the dynamism of its publishing sector making it particularly attractive to many intellectuals and political exiles (Syrians and Iraqis in particular). The year 1958

marked a turning point in relation to this history bringing to the fore the political effects of Nasserism beyond Egypt. The confrontation between Arabism and Lebanonism in Beirut came to a head with the proclamation of the United Arab Republic in February 1958 (Salibi, 1988; Traboulsi, 2007). Additionally, with the coup against the Iraqi monarchy in July 1958, an intense cycle of debates began between communists, Nasserites, Baathists and other more ideologically heterogeneous political currents (Corm, 2015). The arrival of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1969 consecrated Beirut as a veritable epicenter of intellectual contestation and ideological debate in the Arab world. Numerous newspapers, journals, publishing houses and research centers, of Arab nationalist and Marxist orientation in particular were founded. With the onset of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, the influx of political funding paradoxically acted to speed up the development of these social and cultural dynamics rather than slow them down (Mermier, 2016; Raymond, 2019, 2021). In 1979, the Islamic revolution in Iran and its repercussions in Lebanon reoriented the essential framework of political and intellectual debates. The intermittent alliances and hostilities that characterized the precarious relationship between Marxist/Pan-Arabic leftist political groupings and political Islam would in large part determine the evolution of the Beirut intellectual scene (Dot-Pouillard, 2009). If the Israeli invasion of 1982 sounded the death knell of a now glorified era, emulation would continue, and embers of resurgence continued to flare up, most notably in the communities that formed in exile. Thus, “Beirut bubbles” were formed in Paris and London at the beginning of the 1980s, whose newspapers and journals were then distributed to readers in different Arab capitals (Abdulkarim, 1993).

The purpose of the research seminar is to inspire historical, sociological and political reflection on the intellectual worlds that were formed in Beirut throughout this period and on their contemporary legacies. The aim is to adopt a socio-historical perspective that interrogates not only the political and intellectual cycle that began at the end of the 1950s and that reached its peak in the 1970s, but also the reiterations, echoes and reverberations that continued in Beirut until the beginning of the 21st century. This entails looking not only at continuities but paying equal mind to discontinuities and mutations of discourse and praxis. Attention will be given both to intellectual actors, their work and the debates they engaged in as well as to the social and political logics that frame both the epistemic background of their work (Foucault, 1966) and the conditions of its circulation and reception. Working from this perspective, the seminar will privilege works that adopt approaches taken from the history and sociology of intellectuals (Bourdieu, 1994, 2001) or from the social history of political ideas (Gaboriaux, Skornicki, 2017; Hayat, Wesbein, 2020), while also being open to work in intellectual history or cultural studies attentive to the interactions between individuals and their social world.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, three potential axes of research will be examined with particular attention:

## **1. Beirut as Arab Intellectual Capital**

Starting from the contemporary history of the city, and the foundational moment that the Nahda represented in many respects, we will examine the particular function of this city in the Arab world from the 1950s onwards and the circulation of people and ideas that made it a regional hub in relation to the major intellectual debates going on at the time. What role did the Arab diasporas (for example, the Iraqi Baathist or Egyptian communist networks) play in the intellectual and political life of the Lebanese capital? Through which institutional spaces and media did they project their influence? How did the Syrian Baathists, composed more or less of local dissidents, interact with and influence the young Lebanese intelligentsia at the time? How did this transnational circulation of people and ideas favor the formation of social networks and political and intellectual institutions in the Lebanese capital? What effect did the establishment of the PLO have in Lebanon on the configuration of Beirut's intellectual worlds and on the political and ideological debates they were associated with? Through what channels and vectors did these debates spread out beyond Lebanon?

## **2. Long-term Trajectories: Intellectual Figures and Memory**

Beirut intellectual life has been animated by several figures who have retained a strong influence across several generations, through their consistent interventions within the Lebanese media, the continued publication of their written works and via the renewed interest in them and their work emanating today from activist circles as well as the academy (Frangié, 2012, 2015; Younes, 2016; Amel, Safieddine, 2020; Bardawil, 2020). While this seminar intends to provide an account of this recent rediscovery of some of these intellectual figures, it will at the same time seek to understand the reasons for this resurgence of interest both on the part of the research community as well as Arab intellectual and activist circles. What is driving the need for this translation and republishing of Arab intellectuals (many now deceased for several decades)? Why is the generation of the 1960s and 1970s in particular being read today? How do the written works and social trajectories of these figures bear witness to their era, and how do they shed light on more contemporary socio-political dynamics and issues? What is it about the past that invites itself into the present and allows it to carry with it a certain disruptive potential (Bensaïd, 1995)? In what way does the production of memoirs by certain intellectuals allow for the reconstitution of a past (and present) collective experience? And at the same time, what are the pitfalls of this type of writing?

## **3. The Social Fabric of Political Ideas: Peer Groups, Institutions, Media**

A final thread of research will question the social organization of Beirut's intellectual worlds in order to shed light on how political ideas are manufactured. On the one hand, we will focus on the peer groups, social networks and organizations that make up these intellectual worlds, from more institutionalized forums such as the Lebanese "Cenacle" (Elias, 2019), the Arab Cultural Club or the Writers' Union to more informal networks organized around a publishing house, a journal or a particular place of sociability (café, cultural club, etc.)? What is the social topography of these intellectual worlds that then emerges? How does this then relate to certain select social categories (economic classes, generational groupings, etc.)? How does this complicate our reading of the political-intellectual field at the time, in terms of the partisan or ideological affiliations of its constituents? Simultaneous attention will also be paid to the institutions and media outlets that allowed for access to certain resources in turn facilitating the production and circulation of ideas. In this respect, newspapers and journals played a central role in the organization of Beirut intellectual life.(Raymond, 2021) The presentations given in this seminar will shed light on the history of a particular newspaper or journal, by focusing on the social background of the actors involved and on the material conditions surrounding these intellectual spaces. What is the sociological background of these intellectuals who regularly appear in the press? In what political struggles were the newspapers or journals inscribed? How did they evolve in accordance with national and regional political reconfigurations? How did pan-Arab and Marxist paradigms persist in some Beirut newspapers and journals within a historical political context that included the collapse of the left and the defeat of pan-Arabism? What ideological or political commitments had to be renounced or walked back in order for this to happen? Under what conditions and by what means did the Beirut press manage to reinvent itself in Paris and London in the 1980s and 1990s?

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