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The marketing of protest and antinomies of collective organization in Lebanon

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Abstract

With the onset of the garbage crisis in Lebanon in July 2015, the unbearable odors and mounting heaps of waste presented the tipping point for people's growing anger and resentment against self-serving political elites, debilitating public services, and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. In response, the socio-political scene witnessed significant developments following the eruption of popular discontent, with the multiplication of media-savvy protest groups, followed by the rise of "independent" municipal electoral campaigns and, most recently, the emergence of a "non-traditional" "political party experiment." Running under the elusive banner of "civil society," emerging collective actions have all been attempting to advance "alternative" forms of organization and political participation. Examining three contentious and intriguing developments that have captured public attention, namely *Al-Hirak, Beirut Madinati*, and *Sabaa*, this article explores the antinomies of collective organization and action in the building of political "alternatives." The research makes use of a thorough content analysis of Facebook campaigning posts and interview data and engages with literature on "new" social movements, digital activism, and collective organization to explore collective actors' contending relations to "the political" at the organizational level. The research concludes that rather than reconcile individuals with political participation through lasting organizational frameworks and coherent political "alternatives," novel forms of collective organization increasingly conform to a global neoliberal logic of action that is increasingly fragmentary, individualizing and commercializing, and a fleeting logic of organization that is mostly unaccountable and unrepresentative.

Keywords

Al Hirak, *Beirut Madinati*, *Sabaa*, civil society, collective organization, digital activism, individualization, neoliberalism, new social movements, personalized politics, sociology

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Introduction

In the past decade, the world witnessed an evident resurgence of anti-globalization and anti-capitalist movements, protesting vast inequalities and denigrated living conditions across North Africa and the Middle East, Europe, Latin American, and other localities (Stiglitz, 2012). A global view of these movements reveals their departure from traditional organizational frameworks (e.g. unions, working class movements, political parties), and increased adoption of new forms of organization and identification. These movements tend to be "fragmented, rudderless, and lacking coherent organization" as they avoid "avant-gardism" and refuse to take the form of a political party, preferring instead to engage in "inclusionary politics" and remain embedded in the "nitty-gritty of daily life and struggle" (Harvey, 2005: 199–200). However, while a large body of celebratory research focuses on these movements, particularly the Arab uprisings that erupted throughout the Arab region in 2011, as "magical" or "unprecedented" moments of great innovation and novelty (Badiou and Žižek, cited in Bayat, 2017: 14), or even as "Facebook or Twitter revolutions" (Ghonim, 2012), several researchers point, instead, to the challenges facing contemporary movements calling for change (Bayat, 2017; Kerton, 2012; Noakes and Johnston, 2005; Poell et al., 2016; Schaumberg, 2013). Confident appraisals and grand gestures to "novelty" tell us little about the nature of these movements or the difficulties of these "new political times," argues Bayat (2013: 47–48). As particularly evident in the past two years (2015–2017) of collective action in Lebanon, actors' choices of organizational frameworks and attempts to build "alternatives" from within and beyond "the civil realm" have been subject to increasing strain and contention.

Lebanon has been globalized since the 1950s if we consider the criteria of globalization and neoliberalism (Traboulsi, 2014: 25). The advancement of the neoliberal project, and exponential increase of national debt was further advanced under the premiership of Rafic al-Hariri's post-civil war (1975–1990) neoliberal reconstruction policies and projects (Baumann, 2012). Rather than address socio-economic disparities that led to the onset of the protracted and violent civil war, economic restructuring and reconstruction plans resulted in a growing gap between the wealthy and dispossessed, placing Lebanon at a critical tipping point. As revealed by the Global Wealth Data (2013, in Traboulsi, 2014), at least 48% of private wealth in Lebanon is owned by 0.3% of the adult population, with an annual income of no less than 1 million dollars, while the rest of the population, 99.7%, own less than 52% of the remaining wealth. The "Taif Agreement" that brought an end to the civil war in 1989, moreover, reinstated Lebanon's "consociational formula" and "sectarian power-sharing system" that in turn reinforced clientalistic networks of patronage (Majed, 2017) at the expense of political accountability and citizenship rights. Rooted in the banking sector and within large market monopolies, the Lebanese ruling elites and sectarian warlords established, thus, a stronghold within the economic and political system, one that may not be easily overlooked as it often stood against major reforms and calls for better conditions for the working class, such as recurrent calls for raising the minimum wage for public sector employees (Traboulsi, 2014: 43). The neoliberal reconstruction period was coupled with an unprecedented crackdown on organized labor, amounting to an extraordinary war to fragment and factionalize working-class organizations (Traboulsi, 2014: 61).

Given the neoliberal suspicion towards democracy, the rise of neoliberalism has also been accompanied by a shift from "government" to "governance," marked by the proliferation of NGOs, and the belief that opposition within a separate entity called "civil society" "is the powerhouse of oppositional politics and social transformation" (Harvey, 2005: 77–78). The postwar neoliberal reconstruction model opened the floodgates for millions in aid money dedicated to "bolstering Lebanese civil society" and filling in the gaps created by state retrenchment (Nagel and Staeheli, 2015: 231; Saloukh et al., 2015: 54). These organizations became the powerhouses for activists and

concerned citizens hoping to realize change, yet they were faced with political closure throughout the Syrian tutelage period (1976–2005) and alienation from the sectarian power-sharing political system (Karam, 2006). Yet, rather than bolster "democratic transition," this governance model created "self-regulating citizens who adapted to the postwar neoliberal order," argue Saloukh et al. (2015: 54). The proliferation of NGOs and the "NGOization of politics" served in fragmenting, divesting, and obviating political opposition among the non-sectarian sectors of Lebanese society away from structural and systemic redress (Kosmatopoulos, 2014; Saloukh et al., 2015).

In the past decade, the Lebanese political landscape has witnessed increasing strain with political factions' inability to uphold the "consociational power-sharing" arrangement and build "consensus" around major decisions, resulting in a two-years' presidential vacuum that ended in October 2016, a 12-years' absence of a public budget (ended in October 2017), and a nine-years' parliamentary extension (ended in May 2018) (Barrington, 2017; Majed, 2017). People's growing disdain of recurrent political deadlock and deteriorating social services culminated with the outbreak of the trash crisis in summer 2015. The accumulation of garbage on the street, riverbanks, and forests left people with the unbearable sight and stench of garbage that epitomized their indignation and alienation from self-interested political elites and politics generally. The trash crisis in Lebanon is not unprecedented. Following its privatization post-civil war 1994, trash management became largely affected by political profiteering, and subject to contention primarily for the lucrative charges assigned for trash collection by Sukleen, a company founded and directed by Maysara Sukkar, a previous business partner of Rafiq al-Hariri in Saudi Arabia (Abu-Rish, 2015). Although the problem was foreseen to happen, political elites could not agree on a new arrangement for profits/power-sharing, resulting in the accumulation of garbage on the streets.

Growing frustration and indignation drew a small number of demonstrators in late July 2015 to a series of protests, that soon afterwards were called for by a Facebook group named "You Stink," in reference to the inept and corrupt politicians. The trash crisis demonstrations, often referred to by media as the "civil society movement" (*al-hirak al-madani*), introduced to the Lebanese landscape new dynamics, discourses, means and forms of organization than those previously characterizing large-scale protests throughout the country's history. *Al-Hirak* soon brought people in large numbers to the streets, protesting political corruption and expressing opposition to the whole political class—"all means all" became the major denomination of the protest. The regime soon became cognizant of the incumbent dangers to its interests. Security forces' unexpected crack-down on demonstrators on August 19th presented a turning point for the protest movement, compelling larger crowds to the streets in the next demonstration on August 22nd. Clashes increased on August 23rd and 24th between the thousands of protestors and the riot police, leaving many injured and one dead. Internal tensions compelled the creation of another group, called *Badna Nhasib* (We Want Accountability), composed of political party affiliates from "archaic" political parties as well as non-political party affiliates. On August 29th, tens of thousands of participants took to the streets in central Beirut, in the largest yet demonstration outside the political parties' framework. In the weeks that followed, an additional number of groups became visible, taking up hashtags and creating Facebook pages to rally people to the streets: *Ila al-Share* (To the Streets), *Al Shaeb Yourid* (The People Want), *Jeye el Teghyeer* (Change is Coming). Participation gradually waned and died off following the government's interim arrangements with Sukleen, that in turn raised additional environmental concerns.

While *Al-Hirak* itself subsided, the political dynamism and popular opposition it created soon afterwards found their manifestation in a multitude of "independent" municipal electoral campaigns across the country, in the first national election after six years of political stalemate. The decline of street protests and their inability to affect change has created a perceived need among activists, as several of them have attested, to capture the opportunity presented by the municipal

elections in May 2016 to realize change, this time, "from within." The "municipal electoral battles," as referred to by activists, marked the building of political "alternatives" that signify a break away and disdain of the monopoly of sectarian political parties and leaders. Leading in this regard was *Beirut Madinati* (Beirut, My City), an "independent" municipal campaign of highly educated professionals, academics, and urban activists that formed an oppositional list to the traditional parties that dominated Beirut's municipality, advancing a technical reorganization plan for the city with a "positive tone," "participatory" ethics, and "appealing visualizations," as argued by several of its members. Cognizant of the incumbent threat, establishment political parties from rival blocs united in one list, the "Beirutis List" (*La'ihat al-Bayerteh*), under the auspices of the "Future Movement" and its leader Saad al-Hariri. Garnering 32% of the total votes (Haidar, 2017), *Beirut Madinati*, nevertheless remained unable to overcome the limitations of the majoritarian electoral law. Internal political and organizational tensions, moreover, rose following the end of the electoral campaign that initially sidelined political contentions in favor of a local developmental plan.

A few months after the municipal zeal waned, violet billboards were raised on the streets marketing a "new" initiative, and re-spiking people's curiosity with short clues, such as "it's time to get serious," "we are organizing," "this [violet] is Lebanon's new color," followed by the name: "*Sabaa*٧" (seven, a sign of victory) underneath. On October 19, 2016, *Sabaa* ٧ announced itself as a new cross-sectarian political party seeking to "organize the participation of citizens in public affairs" through "the formation of a modern and advanced model for political action, following the latest technologies and latest political concepts" (Ayoub, 2016: n.p.). Coming out of the need to "organize" politically and "unite" in a "lasting initiative," as stressed by one of its founders, the political platform (*manassa siyasiya*) launched, on February 19, 2017, its parliamentary campaign, *Ibtisamet Watan* (The Nation's Smile). Yet, while presenting itself as an "alternative," and attempting to make politics more "fun" and less alienating, the political party experiment faces serious political and organizational challenges.

Building on the above, this research is particularly interested in tracing the rapid organizational developments in so-called "alternative" fields of collective action and organization in the past two years (2015–2017) in Lebanon. The article analyzes the organizational forms and strategies adopted by nascent movements that proclaim to depart from the "traditional" frameworks of existing political parties, towards a new conceptualization of political participation and organization. By unraveling the challenges and controversies facing nascent "oppositional cultures," this research explores the extent to which they can be sustainable and effective in realizing "alternative" forms of political participation and organization.

Research Design

This article analyzes the organizational frames and mobilization strategies adopted by the three subsequent collective actions in relation to their reconceptualization of political participation. To do so, I make use of a triangulation of three methods: content analysis, semi-structured qualitative interviews, and participant observation.

Content analysis is useful in making thorough inferences about the mobilization strategies and interpretive frames chosen strategically but also spontaneously by "social movement entrepreneurs" (Noakes and Johnston, 2005: 7). Anonymous data was, first, extracted from the respective Facebook pages of the *Hirak*'s most prominent and media-savvy campaign, You Stink, and from the municipal campaign *Beirut Madinati* using the Netvizz Facebook application over a period of one year starting from the launching dates of each page. The data was then graphed to represent the distribution of admin's posting activity and users' engagement (liking and commenting) over the respective one-year span (Figures 1 and 2). Next, the time frame with the highest admin Facebook activity and user engagement was considered for each of the campaigns, coinciding with the peak

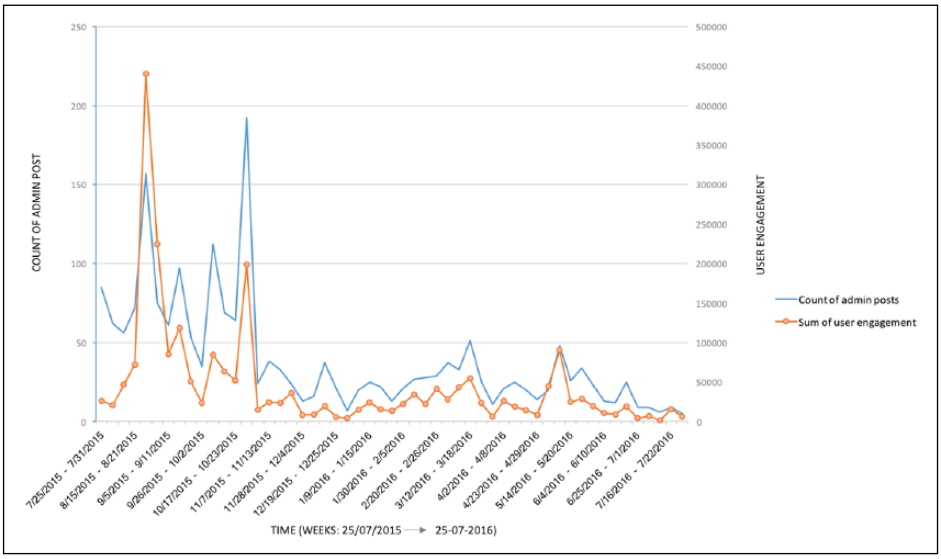

Figure 1. You Stink's admin post count and sum of user engagement.

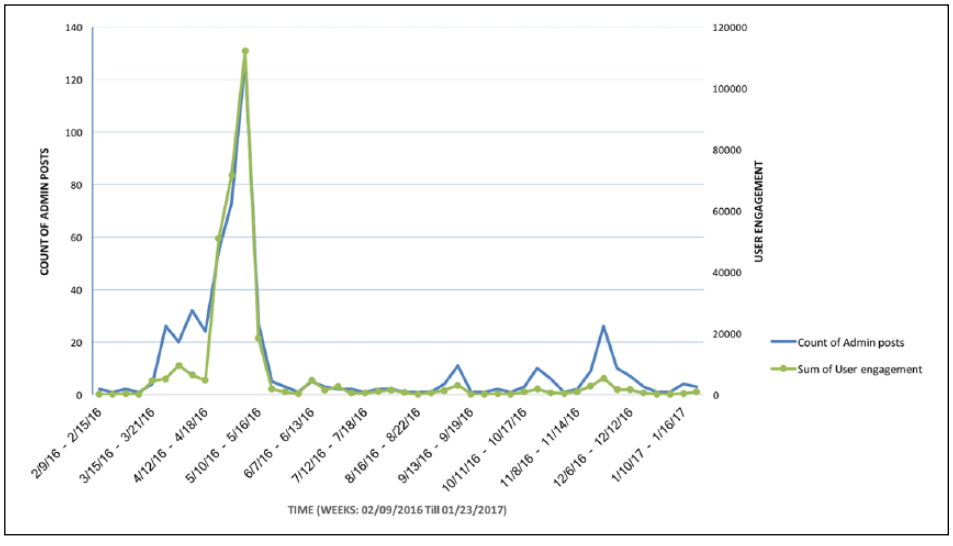

Figure 2. *Beirut Madinati*'s admin post count and sum of user engagement.

campaigning periods of each campaign. The posts extracted for the respectively allotted time frames were then cleaned for repetitive posts or posts without written content and translated to English. In place of its Facebook page, which was new and of relatively low-posting activity and marked inconsistencies in user engagement, the research conducted a content analysis of *Sabaa Y*'s website that contains significant amounts of information on the emerging party. Dominant codes were derived inductively from data by highlighting the exact words or phrases that capture key thoughts and concepts, taking notes of the initial analysis, and developing the coding scheme. NVivo software was used to ensure a systematic and effective approach to content analysis.

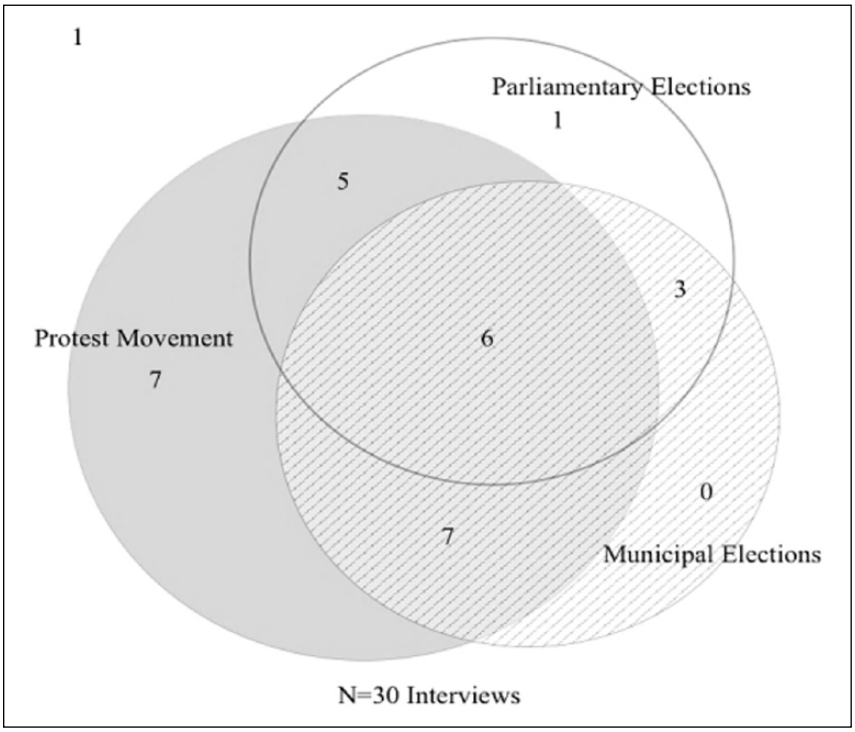

Figure 3. Distribution of interviewees.

Content analysis was followed by thirty in-depth and semi-structured interviews with central organizers and members within the three realms of action to gain subjective insights into their organizational and strategic choices. The research ensured a fair distribution of interviewees across the different campaigns. The majority of the interviewees, as the diagram below reveals (see Figure 3), overlapped significantly across at least two of the three collective action arenas. Interviews proceeded mostly through snowball sampling and were then analyzed thematically to grasp the major themes. To protect individual contributors' privacy and confidentiality, all interviewees were kept anonymous and interview data confidential.

Finally, data was verified with first-hand recordings and notes, collected through participating in the movement's major demonstrations and activities, as well as attending conferences and events organized by and/or around all three initiatives.

The Politics of "Alternative" Organization

With the global eruption of protest movements without central leadership, party apparatuses, and clear organization (e.g. the Arab uprisings, Occupy movements, Indignados movement), theorists suggest that the world is witnessing totally "new" forms of organization and political identification (Badiou, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2011; Mason, 2012). Celebratory accounts of the Arab uprisings, which erupted across North African and the Middle East in 2011, praised these movements as "totally new," "magical" moments of great innovation, horizontality, and potential (Badiou, 2011; Mason, 2012; Žižek, 2011). However, a growing critical literature on contemporary movements highlights, instead, the continual salience of organizational dynamics, leadership roles, and strategic mobilization in shaping and directing movements that were otherwise seen as leaderless and

non-hierarchical people's movements or "Facebook revolutions" (Freeman, 2013; Kerton, 2012; Mejias, 2012; Noakes and Johnston, 2005: 7; Poell et al., 2016). Situating Lebanon within the global and regional surge of "new" modes of campaigning and organization, I explore the degree to which they represent alternatives to and departures from traditional forms of organization and the implication of that on the reconceptualization of political participation.

"Movements 2.0": Social Media-Mediated Campaigns

Social networking sites' (SNSs) online digital tools have become indispensable repertoires for social movement organizations (SMOs) worldwide, and are often perceived of as the "greatest dialogic move" for electoral campaigns (Camaj and Santana, 2015: 325; Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch, 2015). The world-wide adoption of SNSs or Web 2.0 applications[1] for "online activism" and organization in contemporary movements is believed to accord very well with the "requisite features of new social movements: non-hierarchical, open protocols, open communication," self-generated information and identities, and lack of former membership and means of organization (Fenton, 2006: 225). Literature on contemporary movements, particularly the Arab uprisings, has drawn extensively on the benefits of the Internet in disseminating information and promoting the eruption and diffusion of protests, and in creating counter-hegemonic and relatively anonymous platforms for defying repression and media misrepresentation (Aouragh, 2016a: 507; Melki, 2014: 6; Rane and Salem, 2012). The Internet, according to Castells (2012: 229), "creates the conditions for a form of shared practice that allows a leaderless movement to survive, deliberate, coordinate and expand." The use of social media in electoral campaigning (e.g. Obama's 2008 presidential campaign) has been, similarly, heralded as integral to the campaigns' strategies to engage and empower everyday people and volunteers to participate, contribute, and identify with the campaign (Aaker and Chang, 2010). Although not intended as political tools, political groups and politicians in Western countries were quick to notice the advantages of these sites in electoral campaigning (Borah, 2016).

Yet, while there is no doubt in the affordances of SNSs and their potential as relatively anonymous repertoires for mobilization and dissemination of counter-hegemonic content, heightened optimism in social media's potential to "revolutionize politics" or forgo traditional organizational requirements is much challenged. Literature on the use of social media is divided between those who claim that these repertoires encourage "totally new" forms of organization and participation, and those who remain skeptical of the proclaimed revolutionizing potential of e-tactics and their long-term impact. Celebratory accounts that overplay social media's role in the Arab uprisings in the region often adopt an orientalist and modernizing lens that depicts actors "as young, urban and wired" activists who are finally moving away from old-fashioned, hierarchical, class-based and recalcitrant frameworks and ideologies of the past (Aouragh, 2016a, 2016b). However, as argued in what follows, the reality is a far cry from the picture presented by "horizontal," "autonomous," and "immaterial" paradigms (Aouragh, 2016b: 127), or from "the utopia of liberation technology" (Mejias, 2012).

The Internet has been playing, for over a decade, an important role in the mobilization and advocacy of Lebanese activists, trying to fashion for themselves a "new kind of politics outside the dominant political factors (8–14 March blocs)" (Aouragh, 2016b: 125). Besides the far-reaching, imminent, and tangible nature of the recent garbage crisis that served to mobilize large numbers of people, Facebook played a pivotal role in the mobilization and creation of "alternative platforms" for self-representation and mobilization. Multiple Facebook pages and hashtags mushroomed mobilizing people to the streets, the most media-savvy and prominent of which was the You Stink campaign, followed by *Badna Nhasib*. In place of "bricks and mortar" key organizations, the protests conformed to a new global logic of "hybrid organization," combining background networking

organization and coordination with personalized engagement through social media, while representing the movement as a people's movement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 742, 754). The protests brought together a wide spectrum[2] of individuals, campaigns, groups, and non-governmental organizations (e.g. Offre-Joie, LADE, The Legal Agenda, Lebanese Eco-movement) coordinating and organizing the protests behind the scenes while encouraging "personalized participation" through social media. Newly formed, social-media mediated campaigns, without constituency but with loose networks of volunteers emerged, the first and most prominent of which was You Stink. Leftist membership-based organizations (e.g. Union of Lebanese Democratic Left, The Socialist Forum) and members of "archaic" ideological political parties (Iraqi Baath Party, Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, Lebanese Communist Party, The People's Movement) followed suit, mimicking the general aura of the protest by creating their own "campaigns" and hashtags (e.g. *Al Shaab Youreed, Jeye el Teghyeer, Badna Nhasib*). These groups, as argued by several members, preferred to keep their collective identities obscured in favor of more inclusivity, neutrality, and new media appeal.

However, although social media constituted the backbone of these movements' counter-hegemonic organization and political activism, traditional media retained important significance. The live uninterrupted TV coverage of the *Hirak*'s major demonstrations played a key role in propagating the movement and its messages to the public. Moreover, while *Beirut Madinati* also made particular use of Facebook, the campaign, in turn, posted a significant number of links (33% of the posts) to local and international newspaper articles, as well as to scheduled TV appearances (see Figure 4). This was confirmed by a core organizer who conceded the importance of Facebook in reaching out to volunteers and non-voters, yet emphasized the ongoing significance of traditional media in

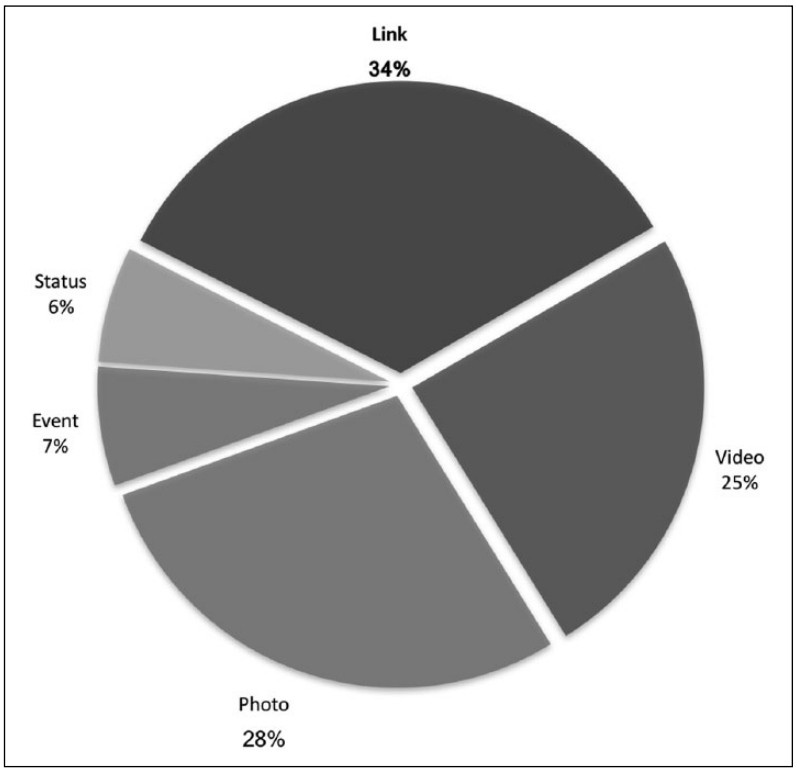

Figure 4. Distribution of *Beirut Madinati*'s posts.

reaching out and convincing voters, where Facebook alone "is not enough." Similarly, despite its active presence on social media, in its launching phase *Sabaa* invested a large sum of money ($62,000 as per its official website) for billboards across the country. Despite the ongoing significance of traditional media, social media platforms, as argued in what follows, complemented and reinforced contemporary campaigns' new logic of participatory and personalized politics.

"Participatory" and "Personalized" Politics of Self-expression

> The Liberation of joining the personal with the political may represent a radical challenge to the hegemony of state domination, but it may also result in an "anti-politics of identity"—an apolitical withdrawal from politics. (Kauffman, 1990, cited in Pichardo, 1997: 414)

Compared to past tools of mobilization, social media has advanced a whole set of new tools for action that are significantly less demanding and resource intensive. Bannett and Segerberg (2012: 739) argue that communication and networks have become integral parts of organizational structures with the emergence of a new "logic of action," dubbed "*connective* action," associated with media networks and "*personalized* content sharing," that is purportedly different from traditional forms of collective action that rely heavily upon resource mobilization and collective identity. Personalized politics is understood "as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances" and an individualized "propensity to develop flexible political identifications based on personal lifestyles" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 743–44). Manifestations of personalization and personalized politics may vary from relatively autonomous action (e.g. climate change and personal carbon footprints; fashion choices, fair trade practices… etc.) to highly coordinated action involving multiple or single issues (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011: 771). The "participatory ethos" serves to encourage and empower regular people to contribute, identify and engage with the novel campaigns through promoting individual and personalized acts of online sharing, personal donations, and volunteering.

An analysis of the subsequent collective actions and initiatives that developed over the past two years (2015–2017) reveals their overarching strategic adoption of participatory and personalized approaches in online Facebook campaigning as well as offline mobilizations and outreach. You Stink's Facebook page invited people repeatedly to share content, as the post below reveals:

> Dear friends, since we are all part of this movement we all share the responsibility of promoting it […]. We ask you to record yourself or loved ones stating your reason for participating in Saturday's protest. (August 5, 2015)

Also significant were the page's attempts to engage people, especially the Lebanese diaspora, transnationally. They were encouraged to share picture of themselves endorsing the campaign or organize small demonstrations in their respective countries. Besides empowering ordinary people to contribute and identify with the campaign, engaging the diaspora and international community serves to enlarge the campaign's legitimacy and credibility both locally and internationally. In fact, You Stink's Facebook page was able to garner a total of 216,365 likes distributed over 45 countries worldwide (see Figure 5).[3]

An analysis of *Beirut Madinati*'s Facebook page also reveals the campaign's marked strategic use of social media in enabling ordinary individuals' participation, grassroots efforts, and personalized identification. The campaign departed from conventional political participation—often limited in contemporary democracies to elections that people increasingly perceive as futile—placing instead a larger value on people's direct participation in the campaign itself as well as in decision-making and collective problem solving. In pursuit of the latter aim, the campaign held several

Figure 5. You Stink's international Facebook fan base (until January 22, 2017).

public meetings to reach out to different neighborhoods of Beirut and listen to people's demands and needs. *Beirut Madinati* also sought to engage people in the electoral campaign itself, presenting it repeatedly as "volunteer-based," and calling upon people to donate and participate, reiterating that: "*#BeirutMadinati is your campaign. It only grows stronger with your support*." Posts, moreover, repeatedly claimed to provide a "*platform*" "*which focuses solely on people's concerns and everyday life issues*" and "*a space for citizens to perform the role of savior*," and "*join the public discussion*," reflecting its deeply participatory ethos. Besides frequently posting users' creative adaptation and personalization of its logo and themes, the campaign also encouraged users' participation on social media, requesting people to contribute with their opinions and suggestions for the campaign:

> How do you see your city Beirut? What would you change in Beirut?
> What is Beirut missing? #BeirutMadinati
> Think with us! Where Should Beirut Madinati go from here? Contribute with your ideas here or via email: social@beirutmadinati.com.

In addition to seeking out the direct participation of people, *Beirut Madinati* posted a large number of endorsements from public figures and prominent cultural venues. A content analysis of You Stink's mobilization posts, similarly, reveals a significant number of posts on behalf of artists, institutions and celebrities, supporting and endorsing the movement (e.g. singers, producers, media reporters, university faculties, hospital staff). By relaying their positive reception among prominent celebrities and institutions, campaigns hope to gain for themselves greater credibility, legitimacy and popularity, marketing the cause as "the people's" cause. Finally, towards the end of the municipal electoral campaign, the page posted a number of "thank you messages" to the hundreds of volunteers and people of Beirut for their endless backing and support.

Sabaa, similarly, frames itself recurrently as a "modern" and "non-traditional" "political platform," as iterated by interviewed members and on its website. As argued by one of its founders, the

party seeks to employ a "participatory" and "non-traditional" approach in setting its program, following consultations and open meetings with the people of different regions as well as with its own members. The party is additionally run by an electronic application, as claimed by one of its founders, where different members can interact, invite their friends to join, communicate through video conferencing, and share documents. "This will allow us to mobilize people much faster and create a sense of belonging," argues the Founder.

As the above data reveals, the development of collective action in the past two years has been towards adopting more participatory and personalized tactics that generate a sense of belonging and identification to, otherwise nascent and illusive, campaigns. In this new form of organizational logic, the "capacity to maximize connectivity and interaction is 'the' political act […] operating on the basis of the participation of all citizens rather than the hierarchical model of traditional politics" (Fenton, 2006: 230).

Yet, the personalization of political action presents organizations with fundamental challenges involving trade-offs between flexibility and effectiveness (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011: 770). While post-institutional organization and cyber-activism may appear to represent more inclusive, flexible and accommodating spaces for struggles than the alienating formal political system and its organizations, they, instead, encourage fleeting, short-term, and individualized forms of political participation. Several authors have argued that online activism risks promoting "lazy politics," "clicktivism," and "slacktivism" (Aouragh, 2016b: 132) in that "it makes people feel good but does very little" (Fenton, 2006: 235). Moreover, rather than promote, as assumed, "publics" who actively contribute to public discourse, SNSs may produce "masses" by promoting "never-ending self-expression" that doesn't translate into action. Hence, while consensual participatory politics may seem more inclusive and even morally superior, this form of personalized and virtual self-expression resuscitated individualized and fleeting action and is not conducive to the building of lasting ideological visions and political alternatives.

Open Mobilization, Post-ideologies, and Easy-to-Personalize Action Themes

In addition to encouraging "self-motivated sharing" and participatory self-expression, "connective action" forgoes "collective identity" and "collective action frames" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614), for broader and looser public engagement, using "easy-to-personalize action themes" (e.g. "we are the 99 per cent," "You Stink," "all means all") (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 739). In place of hierarchical organizations and demanding "collective action frames" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614) that are resource intensive and may pose challenges in term of getting individuals to contribute, social networking involves "co-production and co-distribution" through easily-personalized action frames and self-validated sharing of ideas and lifestyle concerns (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 752–53). This reconfiguration of political participation emerges at period when late modern democracies are facing a historic shift, most notably in youth's disengagement from political parties, broad reform movements, and ideologies (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 759). Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 743, 751–52) attribute the rise of "digitally networked actions" (DNA) to structural fragmentation and individualization, whereby people's increased individualization makes them structurally or psychologically unavailable to engage in "collective action" and thus, makes resource mobilization a costly endeavor of diminishing returns. Several interviewees across collective realms have expressed this aversion to "traditional" forms of organization and demanding ideological commitments, arguing for the need to create more "pragmatic," "positive," "inclusive," "non-ideological," and low-commitment alternatives that do not "frame the individual" or demand large sacrifices, or time-consuming efforts.

Critical of the narrative that posits weak/strong ties in terms of cost/benefit calculations only, Aouragh (2016a: 491), however, claims that this view misses out on factors like "solidarity,

camaraderie, unity and of course necessity" and on people's willingness to sacrifice and commit to passing messages received on social media. In fact, "peoples" openly mobilized under these campaigns are themselves aware of the limits of their commitment to them, and hence may not be willing to grant them to speak in their names on subjects larger than the "easy-to-personalize" demand under which they were openly mobilized, thereby compromising the campaign's effectiveness and longevity.

From the choice of the name and logo to the necessity of focusing solely on "the garbage," the You Stink campaign sought to mobilize a broad segment of people around a singular demand that everyone can identify with very easily—garbage—and easy-to-personalize slogans such as "You Stink" and "all means all." Towards realizing singular, incremental wins, contemporary forms of action rely less on constituency, and instead seek to openly mobilize large segments of the population around easy-to-personalize consensual discourses, clear of ideological and contentious politics. Yet, reliance on open-mobilization and easy-to-personalize demands places movements and campaigns in positions of compromise between flexibility and efficiency. In focusing singularly on "garbage" in a largely moral, techno-political and consensual discourse, You Stink, however, sidelined the political and structural coronaries of the conflict, as well as the socio-economic grievances that underlined people's demands on the streets.

Beirut Madinati was similarly built upon a consensual developmental discourse that seeks to attract the broadest possible number of supporters to ensure winning and reduce the risk of alienating potential voters. The campaign, as several interviewees have mentioned, prioritized the "daily concerns" of the people of the city, such as traffic, green spaces, and livability in the city, as was evident on the campaign's Facebook page and stated by its members. *Beirut Madinati'*s focus on "daily *well-being*" and "*livability*" provided a consensual veil and inclusive appeal, while overshadowing contentious politics and differential interests vested in the reconstruction and organization of the city in its current form. Yet, while seeking to attract the broadest possible popular support, *Beirut Madinati*'s consensual and easy-to personalize approach kept the city's wounds open in favor of a cosmetic makeover.

Despite the low requirements and high flexibility, campaigns remain markedly predicated with fleeting commitments, temporariness, and transience. As described by one member of *Beirut Madinati*:

> *Beirut Madinati* was an electoral machine with 5–6 on top… when it started expanding in its decision making it led to destruction. Not destruction, but non-functionality or deadlock… There was an urgency for people to stay, but when this urgency ended… we invented seven people, yet these seven aren't able to agree. It's too centralized, the people aren't enthusiastic anymore. So we open it up… but we are suffering.

Even at the organizational level, several organizers within *Beirut Madinati* expressed their preference for short-term campaigns and commitments given the timely and lengthy efforts needed for building lasting political movements and organizations. Yet, when faced with people's large support, the same actors later conceded the importance of continuing the initiative or at least transforming into "something else": "*We felt a great sense of responsibility for this initiative to continue, we no longer have a choice. You created something you cannot turn off. If you turn it off it would be destructive*," argued a central organizer in *Beirut Madinati*. Organizers of the protest movement expressed the same concerns and sense of responsibility when "surprising" numbers of people came to the streets. These concerns raise important questions on the challenges facing transient campaigns and movements and their accountability and responsibility towards their supporters, in whom they risk instigating recurrent disappointments.

Cognizant of the limitations and drawbacks of seasonal campaigning, *Sabaa* claims to represent a development in this regard, as argued by one of its core founders, through its creation of a "lasting" and "serious" political party that is "here to stay." Yet, the "modern" political party experiment similarly advances a low-commitment alternative whereby joining or leaving the party is

made easy with "psychological barriers for joining or leaving reduced to minimum," as claimed by one of its founders. Instead of "swearing" yourself into the party or holding "a membership card," *Sabaa* offers its members access to an application that members could delete very easily if they decide to leave the party, or simply send an email that they are not interested anymore. *Sabaa*, additionally, claims to depart from "ideologies and classist struggles of the past," as expressed on its website (www.sabaa.org), celebrating, instead, "individual self-realization and development" and "pragmatic" political choices. Here, ideology and commitment are deemed as recalcitrant things of the past. As described by one of *Sabaa*'s founders:

> People don't want to be part of a closed circle […] I want to be a free thinking person. I […] don't want to frame the minds of people who join this party of how they should think this is not for 2017 anymore […]. The aim is to organize thousands of people […]. There is no loyalty to *Sabaa. Sabaa* is just a tool in your hands if you want be in public life then you use this platform that is only what it is.

Yet, rather than attract lasting commitments based on strong political visions, ideologies, passions and commitments, *Sabaa* risks creating a platform only for people hungry for political office. Therefore, rather than assumedly re-strengthening political participation and organized action by making it "less demanding," these new adaptations of collective action replace coherent ideologies and are not conductive to "long standing commitments or deeply held loyalties, but a following that is also fleeting and momentary" (Tarrow, 1998, cited in Fenton, 2006: 236).

Leaderless or Elite-centered?

Not only are "alternative" forms of political engagement predicated with non-commitment and transience, but their organizational structures and decision-making processes also put to test their supposed "leaderlessness" and "horizontality." A growing critical literature on contemporary movements highlights the continual salience of hierarchical organizational dynamics and leadership roles in shaping and directing movements that are otherwise seen as leaderless and non-hierarchical "people's movements" or "Facebook revolutions" (e.g. Arab uprisings or Occupy protests) (Freeman, 2013; Kerton, 2012; Noakes and Johnston, 2005: 7; Poell et al., 2016; Schaumberg, 2013).

Although the protest movement of 2015 in Lebanon may appear unorganized and largely premediated online, a significant amount of thought and inter- and intra-group debates were taking place behind the scenes and in coordination meetings to define and direct the movement. However, given the fluid and unstructured nature of the movement's organization, the task of shaping and defining the nature and direction of the protests often fell to self-proclaimed and self-assigned leaders. Novel forms of connective organization are highly indicative of the effects of "who does the speaking" and their "active superiority" in shaping discourses and meanings for the masses, and "policing" the direction of the movement, while excluding others and limiting the "realm of the possible" (Kerton, 2012: 304–5; Poell et al., 2016: 1009). One of the most recurrent issues raised by interviewees across circles is the high level of "ego" displayed by several individual activists during the protest movement in 2015 in their competition to become the self-proclaimed leaders of the movement.

Moreover, the criteria for inclusion or exclusion from the coordination meetings of the *Hirak* were, as argued by several members, inherently tied to actors' positionality within the networks of activism or their self-proclaimed superiority in mobilizing more numbers to the streets. As stated by a member of the AUB Secular Club that has participated in the protests: "Going into the backstage of organization is built more on personal relations […] than on characteristics and representation." Central activists thinking retrospectively to their role in organizing the protests conceded their lack of representational legitimacy. In the concessions of a central organizer from You Stink,

> The people went down to the streets because they were really disgusted (and fed up) from this situation and we have no right to proclaim ourselves as leaders of these people […]. What we learned is that this street is not for us, we are not entitled to say that we represent everyone… we represent only ourselves.

Yet, "we represent ourselves," also entails a lack of accountability towards the movement or people in whom we risk instigating recurrent disappointments.

The unwillingness to allocate spokespersons and representatives for the movement was, additionally, detrimental to the movement as it created unnecessary internal resentment against rising "stars" and competition for media appeal. Given that the public in general, and media in particular, is often keen on identifying spokespersons and prominent figures, the rise of certain public "stars" (Freeman, 2013: 238), whether willingly or not, created internal and personal tensions and resentments—not to mention internal competition—among the movement's members and also between SMOs. As argued defensively by a prominent founder of You Stink:

> They all targeted me on TV… and made me a leader without me wanting to be one.

Hence, while the movement refrained from assigning spokespersons and representatives on its behalf, the absence of official representatives resulted, willingly or not, in the rise of media "stars," triggering what was often termed as marked "egoism"—or in other terms, detrimental resentment and competitiveness between members.

Although *Beirut Madinati* has been perceived by some members as a marked development from an "oppositional movement limited to protestation and opposition," the campaign's electoral and post-electoral organization remains fraught with similar challenges to those it hoped to overcome. As argued by more than one of its central members, despite the "formalization" of internal organizational mechanism, decision-making processes and bylaws, the electoral campaign's organization remained predicated by the control of "a small group of people" and "core founders" to whom major decisions and internal deliberations were reserved. Even though this small circle did not pose itself as a leadership, nevertheless, it "held and owned the campaign," as argued by several members, to the extent that its internal contradictions and differences started posing threats to the entire group. Following the end of its electoral campaign, *Beirut Madinati* voted for a collegiate body of seven members. As argued by one of its members, the collegiate body's task is to "coordinate" (and not "lead") the campaign, employing a bottom-up approach that grants executive powers to smaller task-forces and working groups, elected to carry out particular tasks. As described by a member of the collegiate body:

> This is challenging, it's not easy… it's not easy at all it makes you much slower, less efficient and requires more time and discussion. Yet, in my opinion, this is an outstanding structure that will be a role model for future movements.

However, not all members of the campaign seem to agree as problems in leadership have remained. As argued by one member, the quest for greater efficiency often came at the expense of ensuring democratic and participatory mechanisms, with information and decision-making intentionally left undisclosed. Therefore, rather than build for more "horizontal," "leaderless," and "participatory" structures, the deification of "structurelessness" may become, willingly or not, a way of masking power with the rules of decision-making only known to a few (Freeman, 2013: 232).

Sabaa claims to be more cognizant of the importance of building "new leadership" and a non-hierarchical democratic "platform" for members to join and "become part of the leadership," as expressed on its website and by two of its members. The whole concept of *Sabaa*, as reiterated by one of its founders, is built on the idea that the people who designed it "*didn't design it to lead it themselves*," as is the case with "traditional" parties in Lebanon. As one of the founders puts it, "*we*

were able to kill our egos because our project is to really make this platform happen… So this is unconventional." Despite these acclamations, the political party experiment also suffers from similar predicaments. Financed predominantly by one main founder, Jad Dagher, a businessmen and previous member of the Lebanese Phalanges Party, *Sabaa* risks falling into a new form of *informal* leadership that finances and thus controls the party, yet is at the same time non-elected and non-accountable. It is this "informal structure" within so-called "unstructured" or "non-hierarchical" and "horizontal" groups that forms the basis for elites control (Freeman, 2013: 233).

Besides the control of a small number of elites, "alternative" electoral campaigns have unknowingly been promoting "a new form of leadership," in which the campaign or "brand" replicates the idea of the *zaim* (absolute leader) by financing, controlling, and choosing the candidates as its expositional face, as was the case with *Beirut Madinati* and currently endemic in *Sabaa*. By becoming a "tool" for candidacy selection, control, and financing, emerging campaigns and political alternatives, however, risk reproducing a new form of leadership and control that lacks accountability, constituency, and legitimacy. Leadership in democratic platforms is understood to imply constituency and influence. The leader is the individual able to garner the most votes and support from the constituency. In this sense, the campaign or brand risks undermining representational and legitimate leadership, in favor of its self-assigned superior position to choose and control who represents the people. Hence, "informal" leadership ends up becoming more dangerous than its formal, elected counterpart within traditional political parties. In other words, while new organizational fixes proclaiming to represent liberal democratic characteristics and the "participatory ethos" of "openness," "leaderlessness," and freedom, they nevertheless lack accountability and representation.

Using a sketched analogy, "alternative" organizations resemble buildings of networked columns (see Figure 6). These structures not only lack "walls," windows or doors, given their reliance on open mobilization and revolving-door commitments, but they also lack internal mobility mechanisms, such as elevators or stairs. Instead, on top of the networked columns is a small, closed room in which an elite monopolizes decision-making. Meanwhile, a whole body of volunteers, sacrificing their time and efforts for a cause they believe in, are exploited without having any right or

Figure 6. Organizational structure sketch.

opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes. Instead, "volunteers" are simply "thanked" for their numerous efforts and sacrifices at the end of the campaign. Hence, rather than provide for more participation, freedom and inclusivity, "alternative" forms of organizational structures lack effective democratic decision-making processes and mobility mechanisms, as well as external representation and accountability. Therefore, by their very nature, organizational fixes risk becoming more unaccountable, unrepresentational, and undemocratic than their traditional counterparts.

Consensual Organization: "Least Common Denominator"

The absence of organizational structures and decision-making processes, additionally, compromised the role of the *Hirak*'s coordination table that was based more on "consensus-style" activism and "open mobilization." The protest movement's coordination meetings, as argued by most interviewees, would sometimes extend for hours and hours without being productive. Interviewees have brought up several reasons for the malfunctioning of the coordination meetings. First, the difference in activists' and groups' level of organizational and political experience resulted in rising tensions between the movement's newly formed media-savvy components, and their organizationally experienced and ideological counterparts. This created an internal dilemma in terms of distributing voting weights to the different individuals, groups and NGOs involved, making the process an impossible task that instead dictates consensual decision-making. While attempts were made to draft a reference text, decision-making procedures, and organizing structure for the coordination meetings, these were soon aborted and not accepted by certain groups involved. Second, the presence of large numbers of people and the fluidity of attendance made it impossible to manage the discussions, let alone build democratic decision-making processes. Third, the table brought together a vast array of groups ranging from the radical left to NGOs, moderates, and liberals.

Hence, given the strategic and ideological divergences and the absence of clear decision-making processes and organizational structures, coordination meetings were only functional in openly mobilizing large numbers around an inclusive demand, such as "garbage." Yet, the *Hirak*'s organization fell short of realizing both a common strategy towards effectively confronting the crisis and a public narrative that could bring together the many components and demands on the street. Instead, the political and strategic heterogeneity of actors and groups involved resulted in the narrowing of contention towards a singular focus on "garbage," as the lowest possible denominator. Therefore, the heterogeneity of the coordination committee, combined with the absence of organizational structures and decision-making processes compromised the role of the committee to logistical and managerial matters, keen on consensus-building and cautious as ever to avoid disagreements that may disrupt the "unity" of the movement and cause it to collapse.

The situation was similar in the case of *Beirut Madinati*, which also brought together a wide array of people that included such diverse groups as feminists, socialists, and liberals. Since the battle was "local" municipal elections, these groups could "set aside" their political differences in favor of a technical developmental plan for the city, as conceded by several interviewees. Yet, the result was again "the lowest denominator" and "singular" focus on "daily" lifestyle concerns, or as termed by a founding member, "politics with a small 'p.'" Favoring "open mobilization" through easily-adopted consensual demands—while sidelining contentious politics that may divide constituencies—has, however, compromised the campaign's sustainability and the possibility of advancing a clear political discourse.

The post-elections campaign was torn between internal tendencies which support the need to transform into a lasting political movement that would run for parliamentary elections, and tendencies that strongly argue for remaining at the local level as a monitoring body for the current

municipal council and as neighborhood initiatives. Eventually, two-thirds of the campaign voted not to participate as a campaign in parliamentary elections. Several of the members interviewed argued that the internal political heterogeneity of the campaign and its unwillingness to take the time to develop a coherent political manifesto has eventually kept *Beirut Madinati* at the local level, compromising its sustainability. Others expressed relief that the campaign opted out of national parliamentary elections, precisely due to its internal political heterogeneity and thus, susceptibility to breakdown. Hence, given the absence of formalized leadership and decision-making processes, and increased reliance on open-mobilization and "inclusive," "consensual" politics, "alternative" forms of political participation are often predicated with deadlock, transience, and political incoherence.

The Marketing of Protest and Branding of "Alternatives": Start-Ups and Aversion to Risk

Tools of protest and mobilization have developed significantly with the rise of extra-institutional organizational frameworks, increasingly reliant upon the affordances of SNSs and their potential as marketing platforms. "The page," argue Poell et al. (2016: 1004), needs to be understood as a marketing instrument or a brand. Contrary to "collective action frames," branding is built on commercial brand management techniques that create a dynamic platform that actively engages users and demands their participation and input, channeling those, as in marketing, into "feedback loops" that "pre-structure" and anticipate user actions and meanings (Arvidsson, 2006: 95; Lury, 2004; Poell et al., 2016: 1010). Rather than direct, command, and proclaim in the traditional sense, "connective leaders" use their marketing skills to direct social movement frames (Della Ratta and Valeriani, 2012; Lury, 2004: 39; Poell et al., 2016: 996–97;). Unlike traditional leaders who usually represent prominent figures, "connective leaders" usually present themselves as the "collectivities" and "publics" to secure the inclusivity of the movement (Coleman, 2014; Poell et al., 2016), and distance it from ideological and political associations. This obsession with appearing "leaderless," complements contemporary movements' focus on transcending traditional political alignments and ideologies, and catering for increasing individualization of political activism. The affordances of social media have also contributed to a "new logic of action" increasingly premised upon commercial marketing appeal, rather than on lasting ideological commitments. In the words of an active member of the Union of Lebanese Democratic Left and the Communist Party,

> To create a new campaign, all we do nowadays is put all our efforts to come up with something like the name "You Stink." […] The main aim is to attract people psychologically, to give them something they feel they belong to […]. Only later do you think of a way to convey your discourse […]. But a name without content, soon afterwards dies … and it died I believe. Whatever is born quickly, dies quickly.

Recent literature, however, has increasingly been critical of "the limits of a participatory culture in the context of capitalism and consumerism," and the commercial nature and heightened personalization of SNSs (Mejias, 2009: 605–7). A growing critical literature forgoes a study of the "kind of opportunities" provided by SNSs in favor of exploring instead the "kind of markets" in which SNSs operate and hence in which "digital activism" is increasingly spawned (Mejias, 2009: 607). Critics claim that the "relationship between new media technologies and social/political mobilization is a specifically modern phenomenon, contemporaneous with and responding to dominant capitalist communications" (Fenton, 2006: 225), arguing that the information and communication technology (ICT) sector is "at the heart of neoliberal globalization, if not its life-line" (Aouragh, 2016a: 499). Like commercial brands, Arvidsson (2006: 92) argues, "the political brand is an answer to the homelessness of post-modern subjects. Like commercial brands it profits from this

homelessness by offering a possibility for identification within a pre-structured space." The nature of new social media as an advertising platform has, therefore, contributed to the reification of the consumeristic ethos in "political branding" that is complementary to commercial branding in its objectives: "open-ended, interactive relation to the consumer" (Lury, 2004, cited in Arvidsson, 2006: 124).

You Stinks epitomized the new media-mediated marketing of protest in its use of "stunts" and "branding" technics to mobilize people, disseminate updates on the trash crisis and raise momentum for action, as described by its main founders. Organizers claimed to have made special use of their expertise in branding, advocacy and campaigning to developing You Stink as a brand. In addition to the name and logo that were designed to be "brand catchy," the campaign, according to several of its central Admins, relied heavily on social media to create "stunts" that could build momentum, market the cause, and increase the reach of the page over half a million (and even a million). In the words of one of its organizers, "*This is what distinguished us from movements of the past… and politically we were very specific* […]. *We decided to be smart about it*."

However, the continual focus on creating "a show" held the campaign hostage to seeking media attention and virtual reach, rather than focusing on developing a coherent or "alternative" political discourse and effective strategy for action. Hence, while serving in mobilizing large segments of people through marketing techniques, new modes of action built upon commercial branding and communication techniques increasingly value the packaging and appearance far more than the actual content. In this sense, rather than advance alternative collective action capable of challenging the status quo, the emergence of "digital activism" has promoted a new conceptualization of organization and political participation that is individualized, commercialized, and depoliticized, rather than collective, political, and contentious.

In discussing *Beirut Madinati*, several of its members used a similar rhetoric, claiming that the campaign was approached with a strategic emphasis on "clever" marketing and "focused" communication. The campaign, as described by one member, was not only there to make "a good score" or "make a position," but was adamant about winning. Therefore, *Beirut Madinati* was approached as a *start-up* business, diligent on propagating a suitable *packaging* that sells, yet aversive to *risk* and, thus, to contentious politics. To minimize risks and increase chances of achieving this *single* win in elections, the campaign was adamant about adopting a distinctively positive communication strategy and employing visuals (e.g. GIFs), while bringing forth a largely non-confrontational and consensual discourse and program. Interviewees from the campaign affirm that this approach was chosen "strategically" to come out as a novel, effective, and confident alternative to the corrupt and ineffective political class, as well as to the "trite negative discourse of the streets." As a member of *Beirut Madinati* described it, "*It's a totally different dynamic and a different approach to politics. It was pro, focused and not diluted, and happy not angry*." However, the danger resides, as the same member of the campaign argues, in the increased reliance upon good "packaging" at the expense of building lasting and coherent alternatives.

Conclusion

The onset of the garbage crisis in summer 2015 and unbearable stench and sight of trash in the streets marked the tipping point of people's growing disaffection and disdain. Encouraged by the political opportunity presented by recurrent political deadlock and growing popular disdain, the past two years (2015–2017) witnessed the rapid development of movements and campaigns that presented themselves as "alternatives" to the corrupt political elites that monopolized the political scene, and to the "traditional" forms of political participation and organization.

However, an analysis of the recent modes of protest and campaigning that claim to depart from traditional organizational frameworks and "politics of the past," reveals a series of internal contradictions. Rather than advance alternative modes of action, the extensive oppositional culture that neoliberalism has spawned within itself remains tied to many of its propositions, and seems incapable of escaping the neoliberal focus on the individual that has trumped any "democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities" (Harvey, 2005: 176).

In this article, I have argued that through their "organizational fixes," novel forms of collective action reconfigure the nature of political participation and the conceptualization of "the political," defined by Mouffe (2005) as a realm of contention and hegemonic interests. The "common sense" informing contemporary social movements theory, is the idea that thanks to globalization, the world has entered a "second modernity" in which individuals liberated from collective ties can now dedicate themselves to cultivating "a diversity of lifestyles, unhindered by antiquated attachments" (Mouffe, 2005: 1). The rise of new oppositional cultures occurs at a time in the global stage when concepts of revolution as fundamental change and concerns over redistribution are being replaced by an "aversion of structures" and "allure of fluid and free forms" (Harvey, 2005: 202). Devoid of a class dimension and built upon "ethical truths," a "reinvented civil society" stands as a remedy that values human freedom, yet remains defenseless against the onslaught of neoliberalism (Bayat, 2017: 178).

Given the political alienation and structural fragmentation and individualization facing political participation, many organizations are finding they must "engage people differently" (Bennett et al, 2012: 759). Yet, rather than reconcile individuals with political participation, institutional fixes that claim to depart from past forms of hierarchically-brokered organization and partisan "politics of the past," cater for increased fragmentation, commercialization, and individualization. While flexibly mobilizing wide segments of the population through non-demanding, non-ideological, inclusive and personalized polemics, the need to transcend from reactionary politics to concrete action through effective, lasting, and powerful bodies capable of challenging the established political class has become a global dilemma for emerging grassroots protests and campaigns. Moreover, while claiming to have radically departed from traditional, hierarchical, and centralized organizations towards more participatory, easy-to-personalize, and leaderless organizations, new forms of organization often risk undermining formal democratic organizational structures, reducing political contention, and directing political "alternatives" towards conformity in favoring the "packaging" that "sells." The focus shifts from developing a coherent political discourse and sustainable organization, to becoming the most media-savvy, appealing, and inclusive brand in the virtual street.

The development of collective action over the past two years has increased the perceived need, in the eyes of actors, for creating lasting political organizations outside the realms of civil activism or street mobilization, and capable of influencing change. Yet, as revealed by this research, the choices of organizational frameworks and decision-making processes pose the greatest challenge for building sustainable, effective, and democratic alternatives and political visions. Talks of newness or continuity aside, the implications of favorable forms and organization fixes upon political action have been paramount. As this research argues, rather than promote "alternative" political identities and organizations, capable of challenging the status quo or envisaging a new order, "new oppositional cultures" find themselves inherently tied to neoliberalism's commodifying, fragmenting, and individualizing discourses and fields of action. Questioning the celebrated novelty, leaderlessness, and participatory potential of new organizational forms that claim to depart from traditional political frameworks, and their impacts upon political citizenship, this research makes clear how organization is not "a technical but a political question" (Harman, 1978, cited in Schaumberg, 2013: 380).

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Notes

1. The term refers to the changes in the way Web pages place greater emphasis on "user-generated content" and transforming sites from passive sources of information to collaborative and participatory platforms, e.g., Facebook, Flickr, YouTube (Devedžić and Gaševic, 2009).
2. Those varied widely, both strategically and politically—as became apparent in the tension that immediately arose between acknowledging the macro-political and structural nature of the garbage crisis, and a singular focus on solving the "garbage" crisis through its technicalities.
3. Based on data extracted with the Netvizz Facebook application and plotted using Tableau software.

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