

Looking the beast in the eye

**COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE CIVIL WAR  
IN LEBANON**

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## Introduction

*"Whenever a shell fell the candle would be blown out. It was very frightening: so frightening that I thought I couldn't go on. After a while you begin to feel sure that the next shell will get you, that you can't possibly survive. You just hope it won't be too painful. Then oblivion sets in. There's a mechanism in the human mind, which obliterates terrible memories. I sometimes wonder now whether it really happened."*<sup>1</sup> – Kamal Salibi, 1994.

After a period in the early 1990s when all effort was focused on recovering from the chaos of civil war, the Lebanese have in the last few years witnessed a number of attempts to try to deal with the memory of the war. Gradually, the collective amnesia and the silence, which marked the early years of recovery, are being broken. Although this does not take place on a state-sanctioned basis, civil society in Lebanon is rich with examples of groups and individuals who come to the fore to share their memory and discuss the legacy of the war years. Examples can be found on the web, in memoirs, in novels and poetry, in the press and in films as well as in less obvious forms of “popular history” such as actual historical works, the architectural reconstruction of Beirut and commemorative ceremonies. All of these

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted p. 209 in Dalrype, William: *From the holy mountain*, London: Flamingo 1997

different expressions create and reflect what the historian Carl Becker once called “the history that people carry around in their heads”<sup>2</sup>, and what today has become known in scholarly terms as collective memory.

The ambition here is to establish a framework for the study of collective memory of the civil war in Lebanon. It is my assumption that more than being instructive in the contested rewriting of modern Lebanese history the many different ways people relate personal history also amount to a sociological portrait of the Lebanese. The focus of a study on memory of the war must therefore be to examine how the memory is being constructed, both on a personal and a collective basis. Who produces it and what are the political, social and ethical implications of collective memory in Lebanon? Two examples from the last few years will give suggestions to what the memory landscape looks like, the first case study being two recent Lebanese films about the war, and the second example the public confessions of the former Christian militiaman Assa’ad Shaftari. These examples by themselves cannot give more than a vague idea of the entirety of the topic. However, they are only meant to serve as guidelines and introductory suggestions for a more inclusive survey of collective memory of the civil war in Lebanon.

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<sup>2</sup> Becker, Carl L.: *What are historical facts?*, pp.41-64 in Phil L. Snyder (ed.), *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl. Becker*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1958

## The Lebanese civil war revisited

The end and the immediate aftermath of the war in Lebanon was something other than peace.<sup>3</sup> After 1990, a fragile truce among the Lebanese replaced actual civil war, while the struggle between Hizbollah and Israel continued in the South. Society was still plagued by a sense of disorder, heavy fluctuations in the economy, an unsustainably bad infrastructure and frequent power cuts, to name just a few of the less serious trials of daily life that the Lebanese had to live with in the early nineties. Apart from the two Christian leaders Aoun and Ja'ja', post-Ta'if Lebanon has been shaped by the warlords and politicians - not that the line is at all clear between the two categories - who built high positions for themselves during the "second" phase of the war, after 1982.<sup>4</sup> These people include Hobeiqa, Berri, and Junbalatt, to list some of the most bloodstained and prominent in the post-war system.

A law of general amnesty was passed in order for the morally deprived Lebanese to give each other a chance to wipe the slate clean, and for the leaders to remain in their seats. The official justification for this

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of the political developments and public debate in post-Ta'if Lebanon see Monde Arabe Maghreb Machrek No. 169 and Dagher, Carole: *Bring down the walls...*

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between the two phases of the war, 75-82 and 82-90, being made by Samer Kassir in his book *La guerre du Liban. De la dissension nationale au conflit régional (1975-1982)*, Paris/Cermoc 1994

lack of justice is the magic formula of *la ghalib la maghlub*. There is no victor and no vanquished, so the argument goes, all Lebanese were equally guilty and should forgive each other and go on with their lives. This situation has left the memory of the war unresolved.

Another legal effect of the *la ghalib la maghlub* dogma was a law passed against any incitement to sectarian behaviour. Effectively this has meant that a discussion of the war has become impossible. If it does not make sense to speak of justice, then how can it make sense to speak of the war at all? After all, there can be no getting around the fact that the war, at least in parts, was a sectarian war with an unjust outcome, in the sense that un-convicted murderers walk the streets of Beirut as well as the corridors of the Parliament.

There is also a more psychological explanation of the amnesic state of mind in Lebanon of the 90s. In the words of the Lebanese artist Naji Zahar, “the generations who lived through the 17 years of Lebanese civil war developed their own means and ways of surviving it (...) based on a very short term vision of existence. People’s daily objectives were concentrated purely on fighting with and against emergency.” After the war ended, Zahar explains, “these basic instincts lost significance. From then onwards the future represented the vast unknown for those who had endured it. Emptiness replaced

danger, while fear of war was translated into fear of freedom (...) To escape the burden of recent past, a 'collective amnesia' erased the memory of war."<sup>5</sup> However there are also those, like the commentator Omar Boustani, who would claim that collective amnesia is a luxury problem, which only few Lebanese can afford to deal with. The lives of well-off young Beirutis, many of whom only returned after the war was over, give them little reason to complain: "Woodstock, Bénarès, ou un méga-rave à Berlin? Au choix. Nineties ou seventies? Amnésie. *Oh, come on.*"<sup>6</sup>

Whether for or against remembering, all Lebanese must admit that any discussion of the war and its lingering memories is painful and is bound to have political consequences. With all this muddle in mind, the question poses itself whether it is at all desirable that the Lebanese should remember. Perhaps it would be better to just let the memories rest in peace along with the 150,000 dead and 17,000 missing. Extreme sensitivities surrounding the memory of the war run high in any public discussion. It would seem that the biggest impediment to the establishment of a national dialogue is the lack of consensus and the conflicting historical narratives that exist within the different Lebanese communities. To quote the sociologist Samir Khalaf, "had the

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<sup>5</sup> From <http://www.111101.net/Artworks/NajiZahar/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> From the essay *Anamnèse* in Boustany, Omar: *État Limite - Lebanese dream fin de siècle*, Beirut: Layali Editions 1998, p. 22

war been a heroic or redemptive experience, through which Lebanon sought to recover its lost integrity and virtue or transformed itself into a secular and more viable entity, then there would be no problem in representing such a “glorious” national event. The war, alas, in both its origin and consequences, has been neither a source of collective inspiration nor consensus.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore it is no surprise to find an equal lack of consensus when it comes to how to deal with the memory.

The Lebanese basically divide into two camps: one composed of people who want to let it be and another of people who want to facilitate a process of public remembrance and soul-searching.<sup>8</sup> For the latter group, there is a fear that forgetting the war will lead to an ignorance of the roots of the conflict, introducing the possibility that it may repeat itself. It is important, they argue, that the stalemate holding the Lebanese in its grip be dealt with. Although this might destabilize the present system, speaking the truth about the past is the only way to face up to the social and political problems in Lebanon. In a sense, this is a Freudian, traumatic approach to memory. The war experience has been so traumatic that for years the Lebanese have been incapable of responding adequately to it. Instead they have repressed it, and as we know, in Freudian terms repressed material has a permanent tendency to re-emerge into consciousness. In the apt

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<sup>7</sup> Khalaf, pp. 146-147

<sup>8</sup> Dagher, p. 50

words of Desmond Tutu, and here he is speaking about South Africa but his words apply to Lebanon quite neatly: "None of us have the power to say, 'Let bygones be bygones' and, hey presto, they then become bygones. Our common experience in fact is the opposite - that the past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, is embarrassingly persistent, and will return and haunt us unless it has been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye we will find that it returns to hold us hostage."<sup>9</sup>

Some Lebanese are simply tired of the war and want to escape the depressing and humiliating association with abductions and car bombs, and focus on the future. Time will heal the wounds and no therapy is needed, so they claim. To quote the historian Kamal Salibi: "Thankfully we are a very forgetful culture. Those who committed the worst crimes and atrocities have long been forgiven. Few people in Lebanon can afford to bear grudges for too long. Who remembers Sabra and Chatila? At the time it was terrible: who could ever forgive mass murder like that? But twelve years later even the unfortunate Palestinians have probably forgotten and forgiven."<sup>10</sup> Other Lebanese simply do not believe that there can be a shared national history; to them a debate about the civil war is paramount to a renewal of actual warfare. Or to put this perceived Gordian knot bluntly: Forgetting the

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<sup>9</sup> Tutu, p. 31

<sup>10</sup> Dalrype, p. 211

war might make it repeat itself at some point, but remembering it will most likely make it happen again right away. What good will it do to look the beast in the eye if it is going to bite your head off?

To more concerned people, like the novelist Elias Khoury, this sort of *mieux vaut laissez-faire* discourse only goes to prove that “the most tragic thing about the Lebanese civil war is that it is not a tragedy in the consciousness of the Lebanese.”<sup>11</sup> Or to quote the historian Farid al-Khazen: “This wound has not healed. The idea is that we should forget the war, turn the page and move on. It’s a scandal.”<sup>12</sup> Or finally the film director Jean Chamoun, who is even more concerned: “The question isn’t whether we should talk about the war, but how. It’s important to not only see the atrocities, but also that the responsible people still walk the streets (...) remembering is the only antidote to a relapse”.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, there have been different attempts to stare back at the beast, but these have all been private initiatives. There is no state sanctioned memorial, apart from a few scrappy attempts such as a pile of tanks heaped upon each other in a roundabout near the presidential palace in Baa’bda, and there is no war museum. There is simply no official discourse on the one historical event that constitutes the basis

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<sup>11</sup> Interview in Washington Post, 20 December 1999

<sup>12</sup> Idem.

<sup>13</sup> Interview in DS, 16/11 2000

for the present regime.

Naturally, one could argue that there is no need to remind people who live in a city dotted with ruins that they just went through a war, but the fact is that Beirut is being rebuilt, at an awe-inspiring speed and in a way that with very few exceptions fails to incorporate the war. Secondly, naked ruins by themselves do not facilitate a process of collective remembrance, rather it would seem they exacerbate the spatial division of Beirut today along sectarian lines. The physical landscape of Beirut is a landscape of private memories for all Beirutis who, like the author Jean Makdisi, lived through the war: “The streets of Beirut, even those that are relatively intact, provide a shifting landscape of memories and sorrow. Whenever I walk by one house, for instance, I remember with fresh pain my friend who lived in it and who was killed one night years ago. At a street corner, I remember when the shell landed and killed the mother of my son’s friend. By another house, I think of the family that was kidnapped and has not been heard of since, and by yet another, I remember the friend who left the country and never came back. Each of these physical landmarks, and many others like them, are milestones in my inner journey of pain. Memories wash over the map and layers of time alter its shadings.”<sup>14</sup> Placing at least some of the ruins in a monumental context would

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<sup>14</sup> Makdisi, Jean Said: *Beirut Fragment – a war memoir*, New York 1990, pp. 77-78

make them symbols of the will to remember the *national* disaster that was the war. As things stand, there is no common public space for the Lebanese to gather around and remember.

### **Collective memory in theory**

The question of how people remember as collectives has become the focus of an increasing number of studies in the last ten years, owing to the fertility of the insights provided; in cultural studies, studies on nationalism and public history, the process in which societies, communities or groups perceive and represent their history is being scrutinized.<sup>15</sup> This wide field of studies is not easily summarized, and it will not be the ambition of the following to provide an inclusive overview. Rather, the relationship between history, memory and the different means of representation will be examined to the extent that these questions appear relevant for the present study.

First of all memory is not history. It could be highly interesting for example to look at the debate around the rewriting of history books in the Lebanese school system<sup>16</sup>, or to look at the more scholarly debate around the interpretation of the war. Suffice it to mention here that

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<sup>15</sup> Olick, Jeffrey K. and Robbins, Joyce: *Social Memory Studies: from "collective memory" to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices*, pp. 105-140 in *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, 1998

<sup>16</sup> Mobassaleh, Zeina: *History, like beauty, is more often in the eye of the beholder*, DS, 22/5 2000

the comment which is often being made that the peace in Lebanon is “the continuation of war by other means”, seems just as applicable to history as it is to basketball; just like the frantic games between the Maronite *Sagesse* and Sunni *Ansar* clubs reflect a political-sectarian involvement of the youth that was previously played out with bullets instead of basketballs<sup>17</sup>, so the historical debate reflects sectarian and political divisions going back to the war, and in that sense “objective” history is of course not completely independent of “subjective” memory.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the academic history of someone like Kamal Salibi is widely read and discussed among Lebanese and in that sense helps to shape the collective memory.

Still, memory is something other than history. The French historian Pierre Nora has written about the difference between memory and history, that whereas “memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.”<sup>19</sup> Or to put it another way: history is the rational way in which

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<sup>17</sup> Moroy, Franck: *Le sport, miroir de l'engagement politique*, pp. 109-115 in *Monde Arabe Maghreb* Machrek No. 169

<sup>18</sup> As Eyal Zisser points out (Zisser, p. x), studies of Lebanese history fall into two broad categories. One holds the view that Lebanon is a natural entity and the war primarily stemmed from regional and global conflicts. In the famous words of Ghassan Tueni, Lebanese writer and founder of the Lebanese daily *an-Nahar*, the war was “une guerre des autres”, a war of others fought on Lebanese soil as a product of the ongoing clashes in the Middle East and the Superpower rivalries resulting from the Cold War. Another interpretation stresses the inter- and intra-communitarian aspects of the civil war, either from a leftist or Marxist position placing the blame with the Sunni and Maronite bourgeoisie, or from a sociological point of view situating the conflict within the framework of ethnic conflicts in weak states. Either way this is an explanation, which, unapologetically, sees the war mainly as a product of conditions within the Lebanese confessional system.

<sup>19</sup> Nora, p. 8

we make sense of our past, whereas memory is the emotional means at hand. History is relative in its attempt to remain objective towards the past; at heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. Memory, on the other hand, is absolute and highly subjective. However, certain places, things and narratives (*lieux*) embody a common memory, that is, a memory on which a whole group of individual memories bestow a shared meaning. To Nora these *lieux de memoire* define the national, ethnic or other social commonalities in a given social group; “an unconscious organization of collective memory.”<sup>20</sup>

The ultimate subjectivity of memory is exactly what makes it intriguing to talk about collective memory. Taking the individual as the point of departure, memory first of all belongs to the realm of psychology, which should be kept in mind when lending memory to an analysis of the social sciences. Unless we believe in a common impulse beyond the personal, a *Volkesgeist* or similar unfashionable notions, it seems clear that societies as such do not acquire knowledge and experience. Individuals do, but their experiences have sufficient overlap for us to speak metaphorically of the social production of knowledge and hence of collective memory, that is, groups of individuals who remember within the same social framework.

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<sup>20</sup> Idem., p. 23

One of the first to study the phenomenon of collective memory was the French sociologist of the Durkheimian school, Maurice Halbwachs. Instead of viewing memory as the past working its will on the present, Halbwachs explored the ways in which present concerns determine what of the past we remember and how we construe that memory. In Halbwachs' view, the way in which we remember tells us more about present needs and concerns than it actually does of the past. Furthermore, Halbwachs said, human beings are entirely social beings, no man is an island and our memory is always affected and in turn always affects the social group or groups to which we belong. Or, to let Halbwachs summarize himself, "the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society."<sup>21</sup> So, when people enter the public realm to share their personal memories, they inevitably bring with them more general images and ideas from their social setting. When people step forward to remember in public they enter a realm beyond that of their individual memory and partake in a more collective memory.

The French anthropologist Bastide offers a slightly more dynamic view on the matter. Certainly man remembers as part of a social group, but it is the intermeshing of individual narratives, which creates collective remembrance, as a process, and collective memory, as a result. To

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<sup>21</sup> Halbwachs, p. 51

Bastide collective memory is not an ideal entity with an existence of its own. Collective memory is the end result of that certain exchange relationship, which takes place within a social grouping – exchange of information, memories, values – between the individuals who compose the group. Bastide compares collective memory to a choir singing with different voices that join in the same song. Of course not all voices are equally heard, elites with access to and control of the public space will to a large degree determine what is being heard and what is passed by.<sup>22</sup>

Finally it needs to be taken into account that just as no man is an island no group is an island either. And here we are moving from the lofty abstractions back to the reality of Lebanon, where sectarian groups have long been key constituents in our understanding of the social structure of Lebanon.<sup>23</sup> That there is such a thing as sectarian communities in Lebanon today is undisputed. On the other hand, as Safia Saadeh has noted, there is also a group of Lebanese, what she

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<sup>22</sup> Winter and Sivan, pp. 27-29

<sup>23</sup> There is an ongoing discussion in Lebanon and in the scholarship of how pervasive, and indeed intrinsic, confessional identity is and what role it played in fueling the war. Surveys conducted by Hanf suggest that only a small group of the Lebanese got caught up in what Michael Johnson has called “romantic ethno-confessionalism” (Johnson, p. 228) during the war. Hanf as well as Gilsenan and Johnson have taken pain in their work to demonstrate how sectarian divisions are not the only dividing factors in Lebanon. Economic frustration, codes of honor and heroism, and a society, which promoted and still promotes sectarianism on a political level, led to a situation where “the values of individual honor were reproduced as confessional pride and vengeance” (Johnson, p. 229). Saadeh suggest that we call the phenomenon castes in stead of sects, signaling the tribal (the word used by Kamal Salibi in *A house of many mansions* to describe the social organization of Lebanon), non-religious nature of the coherence within the five main sects – Maronite, Sunni, Shiite, Greek Orthodox and Druze. Whatever the name and the constancy of its nature, confessional affiliation is a reality in Lebanon and needs to be treated as such.

calls “the secular middle class”, who transcend and indeed contradict sectarian boundaries.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, such boundaries are floating to say the least. Due to the tortured marriage between politics and cultural identity during the war, expressions of sectarian affiliation today come in forms of subtle symbols and codes, and as a consequence boundary formation of sectarian groups can be difficult to study. When is a Shiite a Shiite, in what social situations will a Druze act as a Druze and how are these, as it were, social codes perceived? Given the proximity of social memory to social identity, perhaps an understanding of memory will shed light on the shape of communitarian narratives and help us to get a clearer picture of the process of boundary construction, or of how the Lebanese create differentiations between each other.

### **Narratives and the social structure of Lebanon**

Focusing on narratives of past events can be a valuable way of discerning popular concepts of history. Samuel Hynes in his study of collective remembrance of WWI makes the valuable distinction between two forms of memory, namely spatial and narrative expressions. Whereas the spatial *lieux de mémoire*, such as state-

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<sup>24</sup> Saadeh, p. 65

sanctioned monuments and museums, are frozen gestures meant to embody a certain interpretation of a historical event, *lieux de mémoire* in narrative form are individual stories that deal with causality and change.<sup>25</sup> The individual stories then blend together to form a collective narrative, not as a coherent unit, but as an amalgam of the individual voices. It is Hynes' assertion that "in the construction of a myth of war, memorials play a very small role, and personal narratives a very large one. Not any single narrative alone, but narratives collectively."<sup>26</sup> The narrative of which Hynes is speaking is a national (British) one, but every imaginable social group may be expected to have their shared memory. In the case of Lebanon it is obvious to imagine the existence of sectarian narratives.

To perceive of sectarian narratives or clusters of memory is bound to be a difficult enterprise, since they must be expected to consist of most everything that is daily life both in public and private, and to be subject to a constant fluctuation in terms of substance and size, indeed be the product of a constant exchange of opinions taking place both within and between the different clusters. In order to approach such complex phenomena it will be useful to make the distinction between public and private remembrance.

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<sup>25</sup> Hynes, Samuel: *Personal narratives and commemoration*, pp. 205-220 in Winter and Sivan, p. 207

<sup>26</sup> Idem.

Following Halbwachs, memory is not just what happened in our past, it is constantly being reshaped and expressed in a process of *remembrance*. The memory that is never or rarely expressed outside informal networks one could call private remembrance. Informal networks of people who remember will often be structured around kinship, religion or, in Lebanon, simply sectarian ties. These people's memory will not necessarily find an outlet, or a voice, which is able to transform the abstract forms of personal memory into articulate forms of public expression. Much is forgotten, indeed there seems to be a mechanism of oblivion at play; the more pain, humiliation and embarrassment the greater the need to forget.<sup>27</sup> Other memories simply never find a voice, be this because of social, political or emotional constraints and censure, and they die unuttered.

Michael Hertzfeld in his book *Cultural Intimacy* has explored similar processes of remembrance. As a counter to the top-down approach of elitist discourse analysis, Herzfeld emphasizes that "rethinking the tangle of multiple pasts often happens in the intimate spaces of culture", rather than in the public spaces of the medias.<sup>28</sup> Cultural intimacy is the social and cultural language employed by a social group

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<sup>27</sup> After the Algerian war 1956-62 the memory of the French soldiers involved remained private because "soldiers without victory, without good causes, and without enthusiasm cannot become positive figures" (Claude Liauzu quoted p. 172 in Proust, Antoine: *The Algerian War in French collective memory*, pp. 161-176 in Winter and Sivan). The same mechanism of embarrassment seems to constitute an important impediment to public confessions in Lebanon.

<sup>28</sup> Hertzfeld, p. 12

to makes sense of its past and present, often in response to the misrepresenting generalisations of the nation state. Quite often, these codes are informal and unconscious patterns of *habitus* as opposed to the detached, conscious “cultural production” of national elites. Therefore it takes an able scholar to translate the “social poetics” of cultural intimacy or private remembrance. An example of these processes from a Lebanese setting is Michael Gilsenan’s study *Lords of the Lebanese Marches*, which examines private remembrance of family and clan history and the role memory plays within the informal networks of everyday experience. In Akkar in Northern Lebanon, narratives of past glories and misfortunes serve to bridge discontinuities in the present.<sup>29</sup> Narratives of past events on the personal (intimate) level - not narratives of historical events – preoccupy the peasants in Gilsenan’s book, creating a common, albeit immensely confined sense of collective memory and hence identity. In fact, without Gilsenan the stories would probably never have made it out of Akkar.

Accordingly, the agency of producing collective memory needs to be examined. The private remembrance in a given society might roughly correspond to the sum total of collective memory. Yet in effect, personal narratives are only collective to the extent that they are

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<sup>29</sup> Gilsenan, p. 137

shared in public. For the same reason much attention has been paid to the manipulation of memory by elites, who can take the memories beyond the confines of the “cultural intimacy” of informal family, sectarian or other networks, and make them widely accessible through the mass medias – but who can also manipulate the memory in whichever way it suits them. For our purpose an important correction of this Bourdieusque idea of elitist hegemony must be added, namely that in Lebanon as in many other places the medias are not necessarily national. For the state this of course constitutes a particularly difficult obstacle in the attempt to arrive at a shared nationality, which has been a declared goal of all Lebanese governments after the war.<sup>30</sup>

As for the memory that does find an outlet we shall call this public remembrance. Here it is important to be aware that there can be a number of objectives ranging from the mere therapeutic to profit or other gain, or artistic expression. These “actors” of remembrance shape the collective memory by communicating in the public sphere. Public remembrance can take the artistic form of films and novels; or find a voice in the medias through journalism and TV programs; or in forms of commemorative ceremonies; or, as we have seen, it can take the form of architecture. Communicating in the public sphere

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<sup>30</sup> Dagher, pp. 169-181

necessitates an artistic, or at least articulate, expression. This means that what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges”, “knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task”<sup>31</sup>, stand the chance of losing their voice in the shaping of the collective narrative. In the Lebanese case subjugated voices of private remembrance could be translated to the Palestinians, women, Shiite peasants or other “wretched” groups. However, to add a second balancing note to the power of discursive hegemony, “engaged” artists do tend to represent the memory of those who are deprived of a voice, and therefore the picture is in effect less top-down than the dichotomy of public/private remembrance would immediately suggest.<sup>32</sup>

To recap, in an Halbwachsian train of thought we maintain that the way the Lebanese remember the war is revealing of their social situation. A study of memory will not necessarily bring a clearer picture of what actually happened during the Lebanese war, but given how closely memory and identity are related, it can be assumed that analysing examples of active remembrance will serve as a means to better understand some of the fundamental self-perceptions, which structure Lebanese society today. We may also assume that public remembrance is mostly the work of cultural elites, whose different

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<sup>31</sup> Foucault, p. 82

<sup>32</sup> See for example Cooke, Miriam: *War's other voices: women writers in the Lebanese civil war*, Cambridge: CUP 1987

voices, in the image of Bastide, compare to a choir singing a narrative. The nature of this singing in Lebanon is one of the fundamental questions this study seeks to shed some preliminary light on.

### **Collectives and individuals in Lebanon**

Various aspects of the memory of the war have been subject to studies. However, an attempt to view each of these examples in the broader sociological perspective of collective memory is wanting. Extensive research has been done on how Hariri's rebuilding of the Beirut Central Business District (CBD) recreates or obliterates the connection to the past. Since 1991, this research has been running parallel with a heated debate in the Lebanese medias, between two different "geographical imaginations" of Beirut. On one side the imagined Beirut of Hariri's Solidere has been dubbed "Hong Kong of the Middle East", a vision of Beirut as a forward-looking, blossoming centre for international commerce. On the other side, large parts of the opposition feel that the far-reaching demolition of old buildings is an unhealthy expurgation of the past, and have subsequently opted for a recreation of "Paris of the Middle East", seeing the restoration of the old buildings and the construction of new ones in the image of the pre-war style as a symbol of the peaceful coexistence of fore. The CBD

which is now emerging, seems to be landing somewhere in-between the two visions, but with few or no references to the war.<sup>33</sup>

Another active field of research is Lebanese literature, where the war is omnipresent.<sup>34</sup> The younger generation of writers in their works on memory stress the trans-national, non-confessional aspects of the Lebanese condition, in that way reflecting the life of those who left the country during the war. These count authors like Najwa Barakat, Elias Abou-Haidar and Tony Hanania, whose first novel, *Homesick*, characteristically deals with an adolescent Lebanese's exodus, dual identities and total alienation from the war.<sup>35</sup> The book is telling of the post-ideological outlook of a young generation of writers, who are ironic and often cynical, but forward-looking and therefore less preoccupied with a war, in which they do not feel they had a part save for that of the victim. The older generation, who were involved in a more direct and ideological fashion, are also more directly preoccupied with it in their work; with the madness, violence and moral deprivation that the war inflicted on the personal level. In all these books, critique of society is always allegorically expressed in form of individual war-memories. The more direct social and political comments on the

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<sup>33</sup> Khalaf, Samir and Khoury, Philip S. (eds.): *Recovering Beirut : urban design and post-war reconstruction*, Leiden: Brill 1993, and Peter G. Rowe and Hashim Sarkis (ed.): *Projecting Beirut : episodes in the construction and reconstruction of a modern city*, Munich: Prestel 1998. For an up-to-date assertion of the CBD, see <http://www.lebanon.com/construction>.

<sup>34</sup> Neuwirth, Angelika (ed.): *Agonie und Aufbruch – neue libanesische Prosa*, Beirut: Dergham 2000, and Khouri-Dagher, Nadia: *Paysage littéraire d'après-guerre au Liban*, in *Culture-Societe* no. 569, 1995

<sup>35</sup> Hanania, Tony: *Homesick*, London: Bloomsbury 1997

memory of the war can be found in the public discussion, which I have previously sketched.

The rather fractured memory landscape of opinions and voices, which we have painted so far, does not in any convincing way point to a division of the memory into sectarian narratives, such as the literature on the social structure of Lebanon would suggest. One reason for this apparent discrepancy between theory and practice could be the methodological problem of extricating a private remembrance from a towering public remembrance and the people who produce it. One is left to focus on what can be studied in the public sphere. However, this should not be done without due consideration of the private remembrance, which is the breeding soil of the public remembrance.

The civil war was a historical period of considerable length. Obviously, every Lebanese has his own set of memories related to his own tragedies and trials concerning certain historical events. For example it would be interesting to study how Lebanese of different observations remember the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 or how Druze and Maronites remember the Mountain War of 1984. But there is also a memory in the wider sense of a narrative of the war. Can we really assume that as a product of the communitarian nature of Lebanese society during and after the war, the Lebanese have different

*conceptions* of the war? Within the intimate sphere of private remembrance, how do the Lebanese relate their memories, how do they *tell* the war? It is hard to say since no anthropological examination of the memory of the war has taken place. Is it really so different what for example Maronites in Jounieh, Druze in Aley or Shiites in Bint Jbail hold of the war? Is it true what the pessimists claim that in Lebanon, there is no collective memory but only collective *memories*; simplified antagonistic discourses hostile to the ambiguities of the perceived protagonists' ideas and memories?

Some intellectuals, who have given answers to this crucial and rather sweeping question, firmly believe that although there are opposed clusters of memory, there is also a shared memory of an absurd war with no winners. But, to put it a bit tautological, this shared memory is just not being shared or debated. To quote Theodor Hanf, the war was "the death of a state but the rise of a nation" – the idea being that the war has produced a new sense of nationality, or indeed a nationality where there was none before. Whereas this might be true, the war certainly also reiterated patterns of sectarian mistrust, and created divisions which are yet to be overcome or even accommodated. One could hope that sharing the memory of the most basic things that wars do to civilian populations would bring out the precarious nationality that so many Lebanese talk about and wish to see. Uprooted families,

orphaned children, traumatized parents; the muting anguish of loss does not differentiate between sectarian orientations.

Perhaps the idea of a shared memory is strongest with articulate people, who belong to the educated middle class with a secular worldview that transcends sectarian identities. The idea of Lebanese as *muwatin*, secular citizens, was relatively strong before the war, when Beirut became known as the Paris of the Middle East and Hamra and AUB as the intellectual hothouse of the Arab world.<sup>36</sup> When the war broke out these people were amongst the first to leave, and so quite a lot of those who would brand themselves secularists today spent the war years outside of Lebanon. Unfortunately most of those who communicate their memory seem to belong to this group. And this is unfortunate, because the chance that memories are turned into myths of unquestionable validity is certainly greater within the private sphere of informal, communitarian networks, since here the memories are subject to less discussion and critical exchange between other clusters of memories or sectarian narratives. As an example one could mention the yearly, Maronite commemoration of the death of Bashir Jumayil.<sup>37</sup> These people communicate in a symbolic language addressed to each other and have no intention of reaching a larger public beyond their “cultural intimacy”.

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<sup>36</sup> Salam, p. 41 ff

<sup>37</sup> Matar, Liliane: *Une Genèse mythique: le phénomène Bashir Gemayel*, Beirut: USE Kaslik 1984

The commemoration of Bashir Jumayil has a surprising parallel in the commemoration of the outbreak of the war, which does not take place anywhere in society, but does take place in the press. It has thus become an almost ritual practice for journalists each April 13 to bemoan the lack of any commemoration of the outbreak of the war. “Le Liban tout entier semble atteint d’amnésie” was the verdict in 1999<sup>38</sup>; in 2000: “On ne peut sortir de la guerre de 1975-1990 amnésique, sans contribution nationale à transmettre à toutes les générations futures afin que la guerre de 1975-1990 soit la dernière dans l’histoire passée et à venir du Liban. Sinon, cela signifie que nous sommes un peuple inapte à fonder une patrie”<sup>39</sup>, and in 2001: “l’heure du grand déballage n’a pas encore sonné. Plus le temps passe, plus le réveil sera douloureux.”<sup>40</sup> This collective practice suggests how, concerning the war, the intellectual or detached elites constitute a social group to be reckoned with just as much as any Maronites or Shiites. Keeping this in mind will serve as a useful balance to the valid, but not exclusive, notion of sectarian narratives.

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<sup>38</sup> Haddad, Scarlett : *13 Avril 1975 – 13 Avril 1999 – Les fantômes de la guerre et l’amnésie officielle*, LOLJ 13/4 1999

<sup>39</sup> Messara, Antoine: *Commémoration - Pour que la guerre de 1975-1990 soit bien la dernière - Le 13 avril, ou la contrition nationale*, LOLJ 12/4 2000

<sup>40</sup> Haddad, Scarlett: *Le Liban après la guerre – Une mémoire en souffrance*, LOLJ 12/4 2001, and Young, Michael : *War wounds still open on the 26th anniversary*, DS 14/4 2001

## Filming the Lebanese war: *In the shadows of the city and West Beirut*

Our first example of collective memory is a minor wave of new Lebanese films dealing with the war and, indeed, with the memory of the war. The phenomenon kicked off with Ziad Doueri's successful *West Beirut* from 1998, which together with *In the shadow of the city* (originally titled *Taif al-Madina*) by Jean Chamoun (2000) will be analyzed here with regard to their contribution to the collective memory. Some of the other principal oeuvres count *Beyrouth Phantômes* by Ghassan Salhab (1999), *Civilisé* by Randa Sabbagh (1999) and *Autour de la maison rose* by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (1999).<sup>41</sup>

Jean Chamoun belongs to a generation of directors whose careers started with the outbreak of the war and whose works have been almost entirely committed to the war. Thus, films about the war have been a constant in Lebanese cinema almost since the war began. Whereas the films shot in the immediacy of the war years focused on simply registering the madness and showing how individual destinies were drawn in and corrupted by the logic of the war, the new movies

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<sup>41</sup> A good portrait of the *nouveau vague* in Lebanese cinema (cinema, rather than movies, signaling its European, artistic inclination compared to other centers of the Arab film industry) can be found in Mandelbaum, Jacques: *Silence...moteur...yallah!*, Le Monde Proche Orient, 12/7 2001

all in one way or another try to deal with the memory.<sup>42</sup> The directors of these films are highly aware of the problematic of amnesia, and their attitude is very engaged, sometimes even political. In the words of Jean Chamoun: "Remembering isn't enough. Sectarianism is stronger now than it ever was before the war, and nothing is being done to change the way the young are being educated, so they can challenge that. There is not time to waste."<sup>43</sup>

Memory is the point of departure of *In the Shadows of the City*. Sitting in his car in 1986, the main character, Rami, is thinking back to 1974 and his Southern native village when the war first imposed itself on his life. A shell is falling and the family rushes inside, screaming. Then the credits roll over the screen on a background of real footage from the war. In this dramatic way the scene is set for the interplay between fiction and reality, which runs through *In the shadows...* as well as *West Beirut*. Clearly, what we are seeing in the opening scene is only history to the extent that the viewer charges it with his own memory. However, the TV footage helps the viewer to bridge the individual story of Rami with the collective memory evoked by the familiar images of ambulances and explosions. Of course the scene is a reconstruction, but many among the Lebanese audience will have similar memories of displacement.

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<sup>42</sup> Zaccak, p. 109 ff

<sup>43</sup> Interview in DS, 22/11 2000

Cinema is the perfect media for relating subjective history like this, being an evocative, visual way of re-imagining the past. What it does less well, however, is providing a rational discussion of either history or memory. It is I. C. Jarvie's assertion that the "discursive weakness" of cinema, compared to the scope of literature, "means that it cannot participate in the debate about historical problems."<sup>44</sup> All films can do is to portrait and convey human life. In such portraits the public memory is broken down to its original units, namely individual memory. As Thomas Weber writes, "dans le film, l'Histoire devient des histories, et la mémoire publique devient le souvenir personnel."<sup>45</sup> Of course, the content and sequence of that personal memory is primarily the choice of the director. Yet, even directors are individuals with a social background, and therefore films like all art forms are also reflections of the society in which they are produced. To quote Jarvie, not only the director, also "attitudes to the past, artistic schools, and social setting need to be handled critically."<sup>46</sup> Staging history in the way *In the shadows...* and *West Beirut* do it is a way of producing collective memory and thus subject to the same theoretic considerations as the other forms of collective memory previously discussed.

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<sup>44</sup> Jarvie, I. C.: *Seeing Through Movies*, pp. 374-397 in *Philosophy of Social Sciences* 8, 4, 1978, p. 378

<sup>45</sup> Weber, Thomas: *Cinema comme lieu de mémoire*, in *La Recherche*, Spécial Edition - La Mémoire et l'Oubli, July-August 2001, p. 3

<sup>46</sup> Jarvie, p. 387

*In the shadows...* falls in three parts, which are all introduced by real footage from the war. The first part of the film deals with the causes for the outbreak of the war. Having arrived in Beirut with his family, Rami gets a job in a coffee house, which becomes a symbol for the state of affairs in Lebanon as a whole. One client's insulting exercise of power prompts another to set up an armed militia, ostensibly to face up to the insults. Subsequently, the two contending commanders, al-Dab' and Abu Samir, respectively, come to represent the whole of militia warfare throughout the film. Other people in the café like Rami, the owner of the café Salwa, and her lute-playing friend Nabil, reject the logic of the war, with different consequences for their lives. When a Christian family, whose daughter Rami has fallen in love with, is forced by circumstances to move to East Beirut, Rami and his Muslim family sadly embrace them as they leave. Nabil is shot for his openmouthed protest songs, and Salwa is forced to leave the country. The message is not to be missed: the sectarian ruptures were orchestrated from above and the common Lebanese were forced to either flee, become involved in a militia or to try to keep their integrity, thereby risking their lives. People like Nabil and Rami, who fought the logic of the war, are the real heroes in Chamoun's film.

After another interlude of TV footage the film returns to its starting point in 1986, and Rami is now working as a sanitarian. One day his

father is kidnapped and Rami joins a militia in order to retrieve him. Following an assault on an enemy position, he gets involved with a woman, Siham, whose husband has also been kidnapped. She is now active in a group of women in similar situations, demanding the return of their kidnapped relatives. Together, Siham and Rami end up in the office of Abu Samir, and the scene that follows becomes an allegory of the situation in post-war Lebanon, where it has been a standing issue that the government, i.e. former militia leaders such as Abu Samir, has withheld the truth of kidnapped persons from during the war as part of the *la ghalib la maghlub* strategy.

Abu Samir: "Your demands are bound to trigger things off and open up old wounds"

Siham: "You know the kidnappers, ask them! Turning a blind eye is being accomplice to a crime!"

Abu Samir: "We want to end the war unlike you (...) Go home and let others go home, bring up their young, and forget the past..."

Siham: "Forget? How can we forget? Those who forget are the ones preparing for a new war (...) The truth! I just want the truth."

This is clearly a powerful social comment in line with other critics of the collective amnesia that we have previously examined. Similarly, the last bit of the movie, which takes place in late 1991, criticises the role of the former warlords in Lebanon after the war. Passing a real

estate project in each their Mercedes Benz, Abu Samir and al-Dab' roll down their windows and greet knowingly: they have both profited from the civil war, so there is no need for hostility. These men have been the real winners of the war, but Rami, now working as an art school teacher, has kept his integrity and is symbolically teaching the children who are the future hope for Lebanon.

In fact, more than being a convincing piece of art, *In the Shadows...* is largely a comment on the need to keep the memory alive. Chamoun tries to convey this by telling the story of the war seen through the character of Rami and the people around him. Rami is not swept away by the sectarian discourse of “the other”, nor by the greed and brutality which other people around him display. The likes of Abu Samir and al-Dab' benefit from the war as well as from its aftermath, but Rami, and Jean Chamoun with him, retain the moral high ground.

Chamoun belongs to a group of engaged, leftist artists, who try to give a voice to the subdued through their work. The public remembrance thus becomes remembrance on behalf of what is perceived as the private remembrance of “normal people”. The three stages of the war – the prelude, the fighting and the aftermath – are viewed from the perspective of a simple, powerless man and his milieu, which can best be described as lower middle class. Chamoun focuses on the

comforting aspects of the tragedy - Christian and Muslim coexistence in spite of the war, heroic bravery in the midst of mayhem and the persistence of love and sensitivity – but also on the way in which the lower classes were exploited and used by militia leaders. In Chamoun's imagining, the private remembrance is not sectarian but detached and national in an all-inclusive sense. *In the shadows...* is therefore a defense of "normal Lebanese" of all sects and a blistering reproach of those at the political and economic top of the country.

Ziad Doueri's *West Beirut* has been the most successful of the new films about the civil war. When it came out in late 1998, contrary to the other films about the war *West Beirut* attracted large audiences and prompted a public discussion of its main themes, namely Christian-Muslim relations during the war and the normal citizen who finds him/herself trapped in a conflict he/she has no wish for. Doueri's alter ego in the film, the teenager Tareq, finds himself in exactly that position on April the 14th 1975, one day after the war has started. On the way from their home in West Beirut to Tareq's school in East Beirut the family is stopped in their car and asked for ID. "We're from Beirut", Tareq's father says in protest. The militiaman at the roadblock looks at him and bluntly replies: "Today there is no Beirut. Today it's

East and West.” The rupture has happened.

After this Tareq is left to spend his days with his friend Omar and the new neighbouring girl, May, as Beirut slides into the abnormality of warfare. In the beginning the sense of adventure is overshadowing the violence and destruction, which exists all around the three youngsters, as they cycle around West Beirut, observing the changes that the city is undergoing. Only later in the film does the humiliating hardship begin to take its toll, as the families of Omar and Tareq are struggling to live a bearable life. In one of the final scenes Tareq, Omar and May are sitting on a rooftop, overlooking Beirut and contemplating the war. “Remember when the war started”, says Tareq, “how we had fun... Now I’m afraid I’ll lose my parents.”

Most of Doueri’s script revolves around the precarious coexistence. While some people succumb to sectarian animosity, Beirut has its pockets of libertines, like Oum Walid’s brothel, where Tareq unwittingly ends up one night. “What’s this East West Beirut shit?”, the old madam mutters to Tareq. “Here, there’s no East or West. Here, it’s Oum Walid’s Beirut!” The main characters; the three kids and Tareq’s parents, incorporate the same kind of defiance. In the rooftop-scene Omar, who in the beginning of the film disregarded the cross that May is wearing around her neck, takes the cross and wears it with his own

Koran. Shortly after, the otherwise rather spirited film ends on a sombre note, as documentary footage from the Israeli invasion follows scenes of Omar, Tareq and the latter's parents close to despair, suggesting the many years of devastation, which were to follow before the war ended in 1990. "When this war is over, will we still be together?", Tareq's mother asks her husband through tears. The audience is not too sure.

In spite of their differences both films in a way focus on the more comforting aspects of the memory – Christian and Muslim coexistence in spite of the war, heroic bravery in the midst of mayhem and the persistence of love and sensitivity. The main characters in these films are hardly ever perpetrators, they are victims of a war that they are not responsible for. The feeling of being trapped in the midst of a sinister game outside of their control is surely a familiar memory for many Lebanese from the wide spectrum of the middle class. However, it also a self-redeeming image of the past, to which people who played a more active role in the war can resort. The absence of any ideological or political symbols in both films - removed because of the Lebanese censors who are wary of "incitement to sectarian behavior"<sup>47</sup> - makes it all the more easy for the audience to avoid making the the warfare. Memories are selective; they often reinforce the decencies

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<sup>47</sup> Another film about the war, Randa Sabbagh's *Civilisé*, never made it past the censors.

connection from the past to the present.

The guilty, in Chamoun's own words, "are the individuals who used people during the war, who destroyed so much, who put up barriers and forced people to pay before letting them through. They played the role of the state but in a terrible way, because where the state has services and institutions to offer they had only debris."<sup>48</sup> In other words, all those who got caught up in the logic of the war are innocent, passive victims. In this sense the films reinforce the myth of "une guerre des autres", that the root causes of the war have nothing to do with the "real Lebanon", and that the logic of war and sectarianism suddenly descended from above on the April the 14th 1975. Moreover, the way they imagine the passive remembrance can best be described as national and detached. The directors are concerned with the Lebanon that they associate themselves with, and their memory therefore only accounts for the group of Lebanese who did not in any way direct the warfare. Memories are selective; they often reinforce the decencies that survive the indecencies of war. At least this must be said to be the case for *West Beirut* and *In the Shadow of the city*.

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<sup>48</sup> Hani Mustafa: *The militant strain*, in Al-Ahram Weekly, 8/11 2000

## The public apologies of Assa'ad Shaftari

More than any other community in Lebanon, the Christians in general and the Maronite Christians in particular have been undergoing a process of self-criticism and reorientation in the 1990s.<sup>49</sup> Divergent interpretations of the last faze of the war have pitted followers or quasi-apologetics of either General Aoun, Lebanese Forces (LF) or Kata'ib (the Falangists) against those who see the downfall of the Christian right as a natural and well-deserved outcome of the Christian nationalist strain which emerged before and during the war. How people position themselves in the debate about the Syrian presence in Lebanon is equally important. The Christian right and the many who are loosely affiliated with it see a direct link from the struggle during the war to the situation today, and therefore any attempt to come to terms with the radicalism of the past is preceded by the necessity of continuing the struggle for independence. This widespread sense of loss in the Christian community, termed *al-Ihbat al-Masihi* (the Christian disenchantment)<sup>50</sup>, has produced a nostalgia for the time before the civil war and for the war itself, which only makes the Christian right more unreceptive to self-critique.

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<sup>49</sup> Dagher, pp. 15-32

<sup>50</sup> Idem., p. 137

At the same time the political fragmentation of the Christian community has in the last few years given birth to a certain discussion of the Christian past. However, this discussion has mostly been led on a basis of self-righteous allegations and a general hardening of positions. Soul-searching and apologies of former involvement in war crimes, not to speak of any real dialogue between former and present enemies in the Christian camp, have been wanting. Thus the sociologist Nasri Salhab in his 2000 book *al-Masa'la al-Maruniya* (the Maronite Question) subtitled *al-asbab al-tarikhiya lil-ihbat al-maruniya* (the historical roots of the Maronite disenchantment) called for the Maronites to face up to the past. If the Maronites took a critical look at themselves, Salhab wrote, they would see that their “war of liberation” ended in suppression, and that they have lost the moral guidance of Christianity and closed themselves off in a defensive and degenerate sectarianism.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most significant examples of the Christian strife over the past was the release of Robert Hatem’s book *From Israel to Damascus* in 1999.<sup>52</sup> The memoirs of this former bodyguard of Elie Hobeiqa were intended to intimidate Hobeiqa, who is widely regarded as a traitor in the anti-Syrian camp of LF. Apparently the book did succeed in alienating Hobeiqa from the political elite, and some have even

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<sup>51</sup> Salhab, p. 11 ff

<sup>52</sup> The book is banned in Lebanon but widely read on the net at <http://www.israeltodamascus.com>

speculated that the disclosures in the book started a spiralling downfall, which culminated with the assassination of Hobeiqa in January 2002.<sup>53</sup> Robert Hatem's book is a good example of memory work with a clear political or sectarian objective. Although this is indeed a way of opening the lid of the memories from the war, such a reproaching discourse as Hatem's only seems to prove the government right in forbidding any "incitements to sectarian behaviour".

Seen in the light of the inter-Christian squabble, the apology, which the former LF official Assa'ad Shaftari delivered in the Lebanese newspaper an-Nahar on the 10/2 2000 was a radical breach with the self-imposed silence regarding own misdeeds, not only of former Christian leaders, but of all former high-ranking militiamen in Lebanon. In his letter, Shaftari apologized to all his victims, "living or dead", for "the ugliness of war and for what I did during the civil war in the name of Lebanon or the 'cause' or 'the Christians'."

The letter is formed by a series of apologies all introduced by a *j'accuse*-like *antadhiru* (I apologize); apologies for having "misrepresented Lebanon", for having "caused disgust", and for having "led the destiny of Lebanon astray". Commenting on the *la ghalib la maghlub* dogma, Shaftari writes that "a distorted picture has emerged,

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<sup>53</sup> Gambill, G. and Endrawos, B.: *The Assassination of Elie Hobeika*, in Middle East Intelligence Bulletin 1/2002

that during the 15 years of war everybody who participated on whichever side was a war criminal". The truth is that "a shameless minority" has built up this image. Hopefully, he writes, these people will see that his public apology "is the only way out of the Lebanese distress and that it will clean the souls of hatred and ill will and the pain of the past." To end with, he calls for "true reconciliation with the self before reconciliation with the others".

Shaftari's piece did not cause a sudden wave of true reconciliation with "the others" to take place in Lebanon. Perhaps due to the abstract formulations and the absence of any concrete details to match those revealed by Robert Hatem, the letter went largely unnoticed. However, Shaftari planned a more elaborate public account in the style of Hatem, but without the irreconcilable tone. Apparently due to shifting alliances in the Christian milieu after the murder of Shaftari's old chief Elie Hobeiqa in January 2002<sup>54</sup>, the accounts were finally printed in al-Hayat February 14th, 15th and 16th. The narrative presented in these articles constitutes an interesting and so far rather unique example of public remembrance.

The three articles in al-Hayat concentrate on three issues, namely

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<sup>54</sup> Idem.

considerations of the difficulties of remembering the war, memories from Shaftari's childhood and youth and, most substantially, memories from the war. Given the precarious nature of these memories, he is clearly aware of the possibly upsetting consequences of his revealing statements. Yet, he writes, "the purpose (...) is to relate this trial to those who did not live it without embellishing or shortening. And the truth needs to be said in order for us to deserve the forgiveness of our children." He knows "that the war was both ugly and complicated and the difficulties surrounding it many", but, he states, "I hope that others will realize what I have realized; especially that the tragedy was mutual and that everyone was implicated."

Before the actual narrative the interviewer in an introductory note explains that al-Hayat does not seek to tell the whole story of the war. Shaftari's is only one among many personal stories. However, the war was and the memory of the war is essentially made up of such personal stories, and reconciliation can hardly be arrived at without a certain consciousness of the role of the individual, rather than of groupings, in the war. The intention is not "to call for all files from the war to be published", but to encourage others to display the sort of courage, which Shaftari has had to mount before revealing what he calls "the truth of the war".

Of course, no one is in possession of the absolute truth of the war. Although Shaftari's account can be seen as an honest attempt to lead his country on the path of reconciliation, he also redeems himself by doing so. Therefore, when he recounts his childhood and seeks to trace what produced the hatred he felt towards his Muslim compatriots, it certainly facilitates reconciliation, but it also lionizes his own role in this process. To begin with, he tells how he grew up in East Beirut in "a typical Lebanese neighbourhood", and although his account carries streaks of the common *nostalgie d'avant guerre*, the general tone is reproachful. He describes the milieu around his school in Jumeize as "intensely Christian". In this "Lion's den of the Christians" the Muslims were disregarded "for not believing in Lebanon as a final entity". Young Christians like Shaftari were socialized into feeling Western before Arab, learning French before Arabic and looking down on Lebanese who did not abide by the same cultural standards. "My people brought down on me a communitarian, introvert alertness, which made me disregard them (the Muslims) (...) At that time I did not know where these feelings of congestion and factionalism came". Now he sees that they were a product of the general discourse, which was prevalent in the Christian community as well as from the institutions imputing in the children what was later to become a deep-rooted sense of commitment to "the cause"; defence of the Christians

of Lebanon and their right to be something other than Arab in the midst of an Arab milieu.

In 1974 Shaftari joined Kata'ib and soon after the war broke out. At this point he clearly believed that "Lebanon was a country made to be for the Christians and modelled for them", and that their fight against the Palestinians was therefore justified. However, his memories from the early war years also reveal great divisions in the Christian milieu. He mentions how in Kata'ib professionals from the good families only mixed with the lower classes reluctantly, and also how the leadership was anything but righteous or democratic. Random violence was the name of the game, both internally and externally. Kidnapped civilians were treated with absolute carelessness, and Shaftari himself signed several orders for captives to be executed. In one of the most chilling accounts, he recalls how at one point the LF phoned a movie theatre with a hoax bomb threat, forcing it to evacuate the audience and then bombarding them once outdoors. By way of explaining, he writes: "There was no reason for this clearly pointless violence, but elements of it were founded in my feelings. The political problem transgressed every possible restriction and allowed us to act the way we felt." By pointing to internal factors such as the logic of sectarianism, which had been imputed in him from an early age, Shaftari is looking the beast in the eye in a very direct fashion. His considerations are easily

translated into a blistering critique of the Christian right in the present. Therefore it was no surprise that Shaftari was met with accusations from this camp of betraying his community after the articles were released.<sup>55</sup>

Shaftari is preoccupied at length with describing life in the Christian camp from 1975 to 1985, his close encounters with Bashir Jumayil, Hobeiqa, Ja'ja' and other top officials, and how void of any moral standards their war became. As for himself, the question of guilt only occurred to him in a religious context. He remembers meeting a priest and confessing some of the atrocities he had committed. When he left the church it was always with a clear conscience: "I was guilty in my misdeeds and mistakes... but at this stage my mind was at ease, because the (Christian) society was living my situation and had allowed for what I did".

This was the logic which prevailed, on all sides of the conflict, and which made the Lebanese believe that they could resort to any means in their fight. After the war, in an uncharged atmosphere, it is only natural that Shaftari and others like him should begin to question the validity of this logic and face their guilt. Thus, the public remembrance in Assa'ad Shaftaris articles serves the purpose of dismantling and deconstructing the sectarian discourse of the Christian right, and in

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<sup>55</sup> Samaha, Joseph: *Nation still in civil war denial*, in DS 3/2 2002

extension any sectarian discourse, which still maintains that the war was justified and that their leaders in it died as martyrs for a *national* cause. The Bashir Jumayil or Samir Ja'ja' who appear in Shaftari's account are far from righteous, national leaders. Just as much as any other participant they committed awful atrocities. In one sense Shaftari speaks from a position within the very sectarian realm, which he criticises, yet by doing this he also distances himself from it and implicitly annuls the past. His apologies become confessions in the Christian sense of the word and grant him absolution for his sins; absolution for what he did during the war as well as for belonging to the sectarian part of the divide in Lebanon of today.

## Conclusion

*“People in pain are often bereft of the resources of speech. It is not surprising that the language for pain should in such instances often be evoked by those who are not themselves in pain but by those who speak on behalf of those who are. (...) By mobilizing aesthetic sensibilities and other artistic energies and popular cultural expressions in everyday life, they (“urban designers, architects, intellectuals, humanists of all shades and persuasions”) can do much to arouse the public to redeem its maligned heritage. More important, they can prod the Lebanese to turn outward and transcend their parochial identities to connect with each other.”<sup>56</sup> – Samir Khalaf, 1993.*

It would seem today that the wishes Samir Khalaf expressed immediately after the war are coming true. Collective memory of the war is being shaped by what we have called detached elites. These are indeed “humanists of all shades and persuasions”, who possess the means, the eloquence and the access to communicate in the public sphere. In their memories, these people make a point of exhibiting their detachment to any sectarian narratives, which can be traced back to the war, thus in a sense educating the Lebanese in civil behaviour. Chamoun and Doueri in their films furthermore take the “common

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<sup>56</sup> Khalaf, pp. 126-129

Lebanese” in defence and place the blame for the war with a small group of usurpers.

Maybe it is not so surprising to find that the shapers of collective memory belong to the same social group. Surely, detached secularists have less to lose from a process of public remembrance, since to them addressing issues of the war is less painful than to those who have memories of guilt to couple the memories of loss. Many detached elites only experienced the war from outside of Lebanon, and in any case from outside of the logic of sectarianism. The beast they are looking in the eye is in effect the part of Lebanon that they already dislike, whereas Berri, Junbalatt and anyone else who thrives or has thrived on the sectarian nature of Lebanese society and politics in effect would be looking right at themselves.

So, although a discourse of responsibility and transcending nationalism is prevalent in the public sphere this does not mean all groups share in such an ethos. On the contrary, the literature suggests that there are strident narratives of congestion and dissension lurking beneath the surface, protected from appearance by self-inflicted codes of “cultural intimacy”. Nor should the dominant discourse of detachment lead us to believe that any public remembrance coming from those who took part in the war is impossible, as the articles of apology by Assa’ad Shaftari

go to show. In the process of apologizing, however, Shaftari manages to reinvent himself, and thereby also makes himself worthy of the label “a detached elite”.

When private becomes public people tend to censure their memories according to the social context, in which they find themselves. As we have seen, the Lebanese context is one where sectarian affiliation is a pervasive yet at the same time publicly disregarded fact. Speaking “the truth” about something as ugly and contested as the Lebanese civil war, as Shaftari so grandly claims to be doing, naturally involves an element of embarrassment, which is just as much national as it is personal. But speaking the truth should also involve caution, since a breakdown of the official ethos of coexistence and multi-confessionalism would most probably lead to renewed civil unrest. All Lebanese are aware of the precarious foundation on which their shared nationhood rests. At the same time the various sectarian and political identities provide solace for the guilt and embarrassment, which people carry with them from the war. This paradox of orientations seems to be a central predicament of post-Ta’if Lebanon.

Indeed, it is important to view the collective memory in the wider context of the redefinition of Lebanese nationalism, which has been taking place after the war. Private and public, sectarian and national,

past and present – these are the opposing points of reference, which interact to define what it means to be Lebanese today. To carve out how such definitions are being accommodated is no easy task, but what the present work has suggested is, that understanding the role of remembrance of the war can be elucidating. In order to proceed with this pivotal question it would be necessary to look at how the content of private remembrance is informed by public denunciations of sectarianism. For that reason a multi-disciplinary study must be called for, which would examine the interplay between private and public remembrance of the Lebanese civil war.

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