The Insecure City

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In April 2006, I was sitting in the back seat of a service taxi when a man who appeared to be Filipino told the driver he needed to go to Sassine Square, a commercial area in Ashrafieh. The driver signaled for him to get into the car and he took the front seat. Right after we started moving, the driver swerved sharply and quickly to avoid hitting a car that had stopped suddenly. Speaking in very basic Lebanese Arabic, the front passenger made a comment about how crazy driving in Beirut is. The driver agreed, saying in reply that yes, there is chaos but there are no accidents (fi fowda bas ma fi accidents). The passenger didn’t agree: “Of course there are accidents; people get hurt all the time” (akeed fi accidents, fi mowt, fi kasr). The driver asked the passenger where he was from and what he did for a living. He was from the Philippines and worked as a cook in a restaurant. But these inquiries only led the driver down the same rhetorical path: that the chaos on the streets of Beirut is managed, that it is an orderly chaos, and, for this reason, there are few accidents:

**DRIVER:** Are there a lot of car accidents in the Philippines?

**PASSENGER:** Yes, more than here.

**DRIVER:** Exactly, there are more accidents there because the drivers are not used to sudden things happening on the road. But the drivers here are.

The driver is looking back at me through his rearview mirror, seeking support, agreement from me about the way things are in Lebanon.
KM (borrowing a phrase I just heard someone use): Well, it’s true that the drivers here are clever.

During this conversation between the taxi driver and the front passenger, I sat in the back of the taxi silently agreeing with the passenger and refuting the driver’s claims. I had seen many accidents in Beirut, and members of NGO groups with whom I had met in the course of my research confirmed that traffic fatalities and injuries were significant throughout Lebanon. But I had also become familiar with this particular narrative about driving in Beirut, the one voiced by the service taxi driver, of there being a kind of orderly chaos on the roads that the city’s skillful drivers knew how to successfully navigate. Moreover, no matter the ensuing analysis, the notion of “chaos” almost always emerged in discussions about being mobile in Beirut. After telling one service driver that my research was about “traffic,” he responded, and offered his approval, by simply saying, “Oh, you mean ‘the chaos.’ That’s a good topic.”

Throughout this chapter, I make use of the word chaos, the standard translation of the Arabic word fowda, which Lebanese used to describe traffic in Beirut. However, I would like to make clear my disengagement from the notion that chaos is an objective and essential condition that can be empirically assessed and identified. Drivers and nondrivers alike spoke of this chaos. In our conversations, residents from different parts of the city, those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, men and women, young and old, all emphasized the chaotic nature of getting around Beirut. The examples they cited, the evidence of fowda they wanted to call my attention to, were not unique to Lebanon: they were examples of the frenetic and anything-goes nature of traffic, which resembled that in many cities around the world. But as I listened further, I realized that the discourse about chaos itself, rather than its practice, was especially significant. Amid these narratives of the chaos of driving in Beirut were understandings of critical issues in Lebanese social and political life, past and present.

SHARING THE ROAD: THE SERVICE TAXI

Although the streets are crowded with various types of vehicles, the service taxi dominates the scene. They are the most widely used form of
public transit in Beirut. To flag one, passengers stand in the street, usually along a busy thoroughfare, and lean toward the window of an oncoming service taxi and tell the driver a destination. In a city where numbered street addresses are not used and streets are commonly referred to by a variety of names, the destination is a landmark, neighborhood, or intersection. Usually, the driver will issue a nonverbal response on hearing a passenger’s intended destination: by tilting his head and chin upward, he gestures no, or, issuing another form of silent rejection, he simply drives off. Alternatively, by moving his head in the direction of the front passenger seat or toward the rear passenger area, the service driver issues his acceptance of a passenger. A service driver will continue to seek passengers as the taxi moves along, often until the vehicle is at a capacity he determines himself. For example, the driver may not pick up anyone else or the taxi may end up full, with three passengers in the back and one in the front.

Service drivers are always already engaged in the arithmetic of fare versus fuel costs that shapes their decisions about which passengers to accept and which to refuse. With no running meter—they are paid the same fare even if stuck in traffic—they anticipate possible traffic congestion in determining whether to accept a passenger. Sometimes, to save fuel, they turn off their engines while idling in a traffic jam. I remember, on several occasions, sitting in old Mercedes taxis that had trouble restarting after their drivers shut them off while standing still at busy intersections. Traffic would begin to flow after a time, and as the taxi struggled to get moving again, drivers behind us would beep and yell furiously.

In the first phase of my research, 2004–2006, the majority of service taxis were aging Mercedes from the 1970s and 1980s with no air conditioning; drivers said these cars were more durable and easier to repair than others. However, by 2010, many of these Mercedes had been replaced with cooled, more fuel-efficient Japanese and Korean cars. Indeed, gas costs ate up a significant portion of drivers’ earnings, as I learned through informal conversations with drivers as a passenger in their taxis, and many told me that they made less than US$15 a day. Figuring just below the average per capita income level, these wages created a strained existence: average family-sized apartments rented for between US$300 and $500 a month. Apartments in desirable buildings and in central or seaside locations rented for considerably more.
While living in Beirut, I saw only male service drivers, the majority middle-aged or older. There are those with and without an education, those who speak Arabic, English, and French—the three commonly used languages in Lebanon—and those who speak only Arabic. Moving around the city along a route they have fixed themselves, the drivers normally put in long, ten- or twelve-hour shifts. Beirut’s streets swell with these taxis, and as the drivers head down streets beeping at pedestrians to signal that they are interested in picking up another fare, they produce one of the signature sounds of the city: a short, but significant toot. At first distracting, the tooting of the service taxis fades into the background of the public scene once one becomes accustomed to it. It is a poignant acoustic, an itinerant tale of trying to make ends meet.

I traveled by service taxi almost daily. Every so often, I took the public buses if I had the time to spare or wanted to save a bit of money. On occasion, I was a passenger in a private taxi or in a car owned by a friend, research participant, or the driving school where I went regularly to conduct fieldwork. For foreigners, using service taxis serves as an initiation into the geography of the city as well as into the specific mores that govern this mode of public transportation. For example, choosing where to hail a service taxi is crucial, particularly during times of the day when congestion is worse. Situating yourself on a street whose one-way traffic flows in the direction of your destination often gives you better luck in finding a consenting driver. Likewise, figuring out how to name a destination for the driver that is near enough to where you need to go but that is situated along an uncongested route so that the driver will not use up a lot of time and gas getting you there will also improve your chances of getting a ride with the very first taxi you hail. This kind of know-how about the city’s layout and its most crowded corridors is an asset in using this transit system. If you lean down and tell the driver a destination that conjures images of bumper-to-traffic with no escape routes, it is not uncommon to find yourself rejected by one service driver after another, waiting in the street until you find a driver who will consent to take you where you need to go.

Like the roadside hand signals Czeglédy (2004) describes being used in communications between passengers and drivers of kombi shared taxis in Johannesburg, these actions represent localized strategies for navigating the service transit system. Adopting these strategies, and speaking proficient Lebanese Arabic, thus enables foreigners to demonstrate a kind of
“indigenous knowledge” and to represent themselves, whether accurate or not, as residents of the city and not merely tourists. As elsewhere in the world, being identified as a resident, rather than a short-term visitor, by taxi drivers and merchants of all kinds also serves as a talisman against being overcharged.

MAKING SENSE OF CHAOS: CLASS

Service taxis play a significant role in the city’s street life not only because of their sheer numbers but also because they are the site of intergroup interaction in Beirut par excellence. Like other forms of public travel, service taxis are a social event in and of themselves, one whose mundane activities, as Paul Stoller wrote of the Songhay bush taxi in Niger, offer insights into the complexities of the social action. As a locus of casual discussion about society, politics, and the nation among individuals from different backgrounds, the collective taxi serves as a kind of everyday civic forum as well as an example of Beirut’s many scenes of public intimacy, which I wrote about in chapter 1. As such, encounters in service taxis are a regular conversation piece among residents of the city. And, in some conversations, they are also cited as being the chief source and orchestrator of the chaos on the streets.

Because services taxis do not pick up passengers at fixed points along the road, and because they stop to engage verbally with passengers about their destinations when they do pick them up, other drivers cannot anticipate when, where, and for how long service taxis might stop. The service taxi’s movement is characterized by inching along the right side of the road in the hunt for passengers and a sudden darting from the left to the right side of the road to do the same. At other times, the service taxi is stationary, in the middle of a lane of traffic, blocking the flow as its driver communicates with passengers standing along the side of the road.

A kind of anxiety is reflected in the service taxi’s fitful movement, an anxiety born of economic stress. Ali Mohieddine, an official from the Taxi Drivers Syndicate, described to me in summer 2010 how taxi drivers were struggling and felt threatened because of the large number of illegal taxis on the roads. There were far more taxis than there should be, he said, because, “in 1994, the government passed a law allowing for the production
of more red [taxi] license plates. So in 1994 there were 10,649 taxis [in Lebanon] and today there are more than 32,000. And this doesn’t even include the copies—because the illegal taxis make fake license plates; they use the same number six times over!” Hearing these numbers prepared me for the estimates provided by Ilham Khabbaz, chief of Land Transport at the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, during our meeting that same summer. She estimated the number of service taxis on Lebanese roads to be about fifty thousand “though there should be only about thirty-three thousand,” she added. Ms. Khabbaz spoke about how, in the future, decals with bar codes would be affixed onto the doors of service taxis and would eventually replace license plates as the legal requirement for public transit vehicles. The number of illegal taxis will be quickly reduced, she explained, because police will have devices to scan and read bar codes that are almost impossible to reproduce.

These issues of economic necessity, legality, and competition between taxi drivers were far from Nadia’s mind, a university student in her twenties, when she described her commute to the university as a kind of obstacle course that culminated in—just before reaching the parking lot on the campus—an encounter with “the worst nightmare of all Lebanese drivers, a service driver: he stopped six times, in order to ask people on the street if they wanted to come in. He stopped without any sign, without even moving his hands up and down from the window to warn me that he was going to stop.” In our conversation, another university student who drove her own car, Diala, spoke in a frustrated tone about how the service drivers “practically live on the road.”

In this way, from the perspective of owners and drivers of private vehicles, the service taxi is understood to both incite and configure the so-called chaos of driving in Beirut. There is a class dimension to this understanding that has to do both with the very mode of driving as well as the social status of the drivers. For example, the taxi’s movement, the perpetual going and stopping along the side of the ride to solicit passengers, is thought to create logjams that impede the flow of traffic. But it is also the lowly position of the service driver on the social and occupational hierarchy that makes his driving an easy target in explanations of the chaos, particularly from the perspective of those who own and drive their own vehicles. Service drivers have a high degree of public visibility—service taxis are recognizable by the taxi light atop the vehicle, the red license plate, or the way they move
around the streets—but, at the same time, they constitute a disenfranchised social group. Visible and vulnerable, the driving of the service taxi is classed in ways that make them a kind of fall guy, easily blamed for the chaos.

Class also framed other forms of public transit. When I heard Noura, a young woman in her twenties who has her own car, say that she never takes service taxis, that her parents wouldn’t allow it anyhow, and that she absolutely never takes the bus because “we have this idea that the bus is for the foreign workers, for the Syrians,” I was unsurprised. I had heard upper-income Lebanese offer this opinion of service taxis and buses several times before. Once, a wealthy owner of a publishing company even expressed bemusement about my research interest in public transportation as she concluded, “I don’t really see why you are working on this topic; I mean, after all, there is no good public transportation here.” I had my doubts that hers was an opinion based on firsthand experience using public transit.

Yet, Beirutis I knew who did not own their own cars used service taxis almost daily, depending on the sites of their workplaces and schedules, to get around the city. Some who did own cars chose to use service taxis or even public buses when convenient. Celine, a woman of similar age and background as Noura but whom I would describe as more politically engaged, had been given a car by her parents when she was a teenager. She described how she regularly drove to university but that sometimes she did take the public bus from her home in the northern suburbs. “I don’t really mind it,” she said; “it’s a long ride, but it’s cheap, and I can use the time to study.” She described people she knew who would not ride the public buses because Syrian workers ride them. She dismissed these comments by tipping her head back so that her nose pointed upward to indicate that they were “snobby,” as she put it in English.

For the owner and driver of a private car, the street—crowded with public transportation vehicles—can be seen as a field of impediments that constitute a kind of chaos. This type of chaos, the chaos that is instigated by stopping is, in this sense, linked with the realm of the less privileged and powerful. For the service driver, stopping involves solicitation, and for the passenger stopping involves having to wait on a public street for an affordable means of transportation. Both service driver and public transit passenger surrender some control over their movement through the city and directly interface with the open public environment and its myriad denizens.
Maya, however, asserted a kind of agency over her vehicular movement that seemed to contrast markedly with that of the service drivers and passengers. Maya, whose navigations of security I described in the previous chapter, usually asked me to meet her at her office in the afternoons. I would then go with her, and we would converse en route, while she ran various work-, child-, and household-related errands. To save time, she said, because parking in many parts of Beirut is so challenging, we often remained in the car—a black Mercedes SUV that she wanted me to know had been bought used—during these errands. Rather than park, Maya would call ahead to an office and someone would come out to the car and bring her what she had requested or needed to pick up, such as airline tickets or documents for work projects. She told me that she also picked up groceries in this same drive-by way by pulling up to a small grocery and leaning over toward the open passenger window to tell someone inside the store what she wanted. The items would be brought to her car, and she would pay for them there, while sitting in the driver’s seat.

These drive-by errands invariably involved double parking, meaning she cut off a lane of traffic, but Maya was undaunted. While I had also seen other drivers of cars, including service taxi drivers, purchase coffee or vegetables from a street vendor in this same drive-by fashion, the way in which Maya called on others to bring things from within stores and offices to the car seemed different not only in degree but in kind. Her errand running demonstrated her efficiency in navigating the physical environment, via the insulation afforded by the private vehicle, to create certain kinds of opportunities for herself that were linked to the realms of both work and home. And what is more, even in her presumption of the possibility of store-to-car delivery service, Maya seemed to carry class privilege.

Maya’s way of moving untrammeled through the city was suggestive of a different type of chaos from the one thought to be created by vehicles like the service taxi. Those double parking their privately owned vehicle in order to facilitate their consumer and professional activities or those driving too fast and without regard for others’ safety might also be conceived of as chaotic. However, theirs is a chaos associated with privilege. Just as in other parts of the world, where the excessive driving speeds of young men who race through the streets are discursively constructed as a privilege of the elite, the young, male shayfeen haloun (show-offs) who speed around Beirut display their ability to move ahead, beyond, around.10 They don’t
stop. Thus, in making sense of chaos, the movement of the service taxis and private vehicles is a site through which the geography of the city is classed.

OVERCOMING CHAOS: THE PROJECT OF DEVELOPMENT

Developmentalist notions that positioned Lebanon and the Lebanese as not yet “developed” or “modern” but certainly on the path toward these ends were also evoked in discussions of chaos. But it is perhaps at the driving school Traffic where I found ideas about “the chaos” being a signifier of the country’s “development” status to be most conspicuous during my research.

Traffic, located on the ground floor of an office building in the downtown area, divided its curriculum into the French-termed théorie and pratique. The student-drivers I observed were teenagers, though there were also some adult learners at the school. The young people were a privileged group as evidenced by their English and French language fluency, their comments about traveling outside Lebanon, their stylish clothing, and their family’s ability to afford private driving instruction.

In the théorie classroom, a loft space above the office area reached by ladder, I sat with the students watching French driver-education videos. The instructor stopped the video from time and time to go over finer points, the students asked questions, and there were moments in which the topic of what is specific about driving in Lebanon was raised. The théorie instructor would remind the students that once in pratique, they would find that French driving theory is often inapplicable to the reality of driving in Lebanon. Indeed, when I took part in pratique sessions as a rear passenger in cars driven by the students, the point most strongly emphasized by the teacher was to drive defensively at all times and to expect the unexpected. Though this instruction did not align with what the students had learned from the French driver-education videos, they appeared at ease with the idea that France and Lebanon were two very different places in which to drive.

Moreover, in the curricular culture of the driving school, France was positioned as a kind of role model and served a teleological function: French driving habits were situated in a distance that was ahead of Lebanon; they were habits that need be acquired in order to move forward
and become more “modern” and “civilized.” One driving student, born in Montreal but raised in Lebanon, spoke to me plainly about this trajectory: “You can see the state of a country in its driving—this reflects everything, the state of things.” He gestured for me to look over at a car attempting to parallel park in a haphazard manner: “See, this is what I mean, this is a perfect example. You can see everything that’s wrong or right about a country when you look at its driving. A country is not powerful because of how rich it is; its resources are its people, its organization. . . . This is Lebanon’s problem!” In this young man’s view, even if one could not exist outside of the chaos, one could at least—even should—recognize it as unproductive, if not a hindrance to national development.

Ziad and Mona Aql, directors of the Youth Association for Social Awareness (YASA), took another, less hyperbolic view of the relationship between the unruliness of driving in Lebanon and the nation’s development. Founded by the Aqls in 1995 after the death of a friend in a drinking and driving accident, YASA was, at the time of my first phase of research, the only Lebanese organization working in the arena of driving and traffic safety. The organization provided educational and outreach services to citizens and the state alike. Through various activities including meetings and press conferences with government officials, public safety campaigns, and educational events staged at festivals and fairs, YASA urged Lebanese to slow down, to wear helmets and use child car seats, not to drink and drive, and, more generally, to abide by traffic laws and signage.

In conceiving of the chaos of driving in Lebanon as a grave public health issue that requires the combined effort of citizens and the state, Mona Aql framed the issue for me in developmentalist terms: “The thing is, as a developing country, like in all developing countries, traffic safety is not that big of an issue. It’s not a priority. We have issues with enforcement, with accountability, with road engineering, issues of security. . . . We are getting there but so far injury prevention has not been a top priority. We need to lobby more, we need to make the government more accountable for this, but the accountability issue, that’s a problem too in all developing countries.”

The picture of the nation that emerges in Mona’s perspective on chaos is one in the process of becoming. For Mona, the disorderliness of driving was a signifier of Lebanon’s development status. This idea, that the chaos of driving was a behavior that would be overcome by progress, emphasized
the everyday dimensions of the broader-scale processes that we normally think of as constituting national development.

This notion of development as a project related to everyday social practice departed from the hegemonic vision of development in the era following the civil and regional war (1975–1990). This was a vision for Lebanon’s progress that focused on economic growth, which was to be achieved through the expansion of the banking and services sector and the physical construction of high-end commercial, residential, and office buildings. In conversations about the traffic situation, some people I spoke with voiced criticism about this model for Lebanon’s postwar recovery. What was missing from this recovery plan, according to Dr. Hanna El-Jor, a public health consultant and YASA board member whom I spoke with in fall 2004, was an “investment in the people.” The lawlessness one sees in driving, he said, is a reflection of the failures of the postwar reconstruction project.

During a service taxi ride in summer 2010, the driver echoed this sentiment. Most service drivers, upon hearing about my research about driving and traffic, offered their opinions about the subject readily. This driver was no exception as he described how “the newer generations learn from the older generations so the only way to change things, to change the system, to change the ‘chaos,’” he joked, “is by taking away all the people that are here and replacing them with a new people!” His comments made me think, once again, about the interest people seemed to have in talking and sharing their perspectives about driving behavior. Part of this interest might have stemmed from the fact that, on the face of it, driving seemed to be a relatively uncontroversial topic that had little to do with the contentious sphere of Lebanese politics.

But driving also seemed to be an experience rife with emotion, one, as I describe in the following section, residents of the city drew on to comment on civic life.

**THE CULTURE OF CHAOS: LEBANESE-NESS**

Conversations about the chaos of driving were also linked with national culture and identity. Chaotic driving, in short, was often described to me as a demonstration or performance of Lebanese-ness that was recognizable
among Lebanese from all walks of life. In *The Autostrad: A Mezé Culture—Lebanon and Auto-mobility* (2003), a research project and publication developed by the Faculty of the School of Architecture, Art, and Design at Notre Dame University in Louaize, a northern suburb of Beirut, the disorderliness of driving in Lebanon was even likened to another aspect of Lebanese culture: food. Getting around, the comparison went, was like Lebanese mezé, “a typical Lebanese meal wherein a large number of small hot and cold dishes are placed haphazardly all over the table, sometimes even on top of each other due to lack of space” (2003, 1). Moreover, in expressing their Lebanese-ness through driving, some respondents thought a sense of civic and national solidarity was effected. For instance, as Ali, a chauffeur and assistant for an upper-middle-class family, explained: “Despite everything, despite all of the divisions and the problems in this country, . . . the thing is, we [Lebanese] understand each other on the road [nafham ba’ad a tareeq].”

Ali’s understanding of the chaos of getting around was not the only one that struck a collectivist tone. Others also described being mobile in Beirut in ways that were reminiscent of Anderson’s idea about how the nation is conceived, and discursively constructed, as “deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983). For instance, when I mentioned to Lara, a graduate student in her early twenties, that some people had told me that contemporary driving behavior stems from the era of the protracted civil and regional war, she disagreed. “No, no,” she said, “it’s the Lebanese way.” I asked her what this meant. “We like to be clever [shatreen], driving our own way, finding a way to the front of the line. . . . We like this. . . . We are Lebanese.” She added, “We do it for fun.” She continued by comparing driving and standing in line. “When I went to France, I didn’t stand in line. I would be at the end of the line, and I would see someone I know toward the front and go up and talk to my friend; and then I’d be at the front of the line. Sometimes I’d be with someone else and I’d grab my friend and say, ‘Let’s go to the front of the line.’” I told her how infuriating this behavior was for me, that I had encountered it at the bank, post office, pharmacy, and other places. Laughing, she replied, “I know, I know, but it’s just how we are.” But why find a way around, why do people do these things? I asked her. “We do it for fun; . . . we do it to show . . . that we are able to do it. To find a way around, a way through, it’s the Lebanese way!” Another young woman, Dima, concurred with this analysis: “You know, Lebanese
complain about the ‘chaos’ but they like it. They like being able to navi-
gate around; they like the challenge, and they especially like not following
rules!”

I also heard Lebanese driving behavior compared to that in other parts
of the world in ways that echoed Lara’s celebratory narrative about the
Lebanese maverick sensibility being observable through driving practice.
For example, in late 2005 while I was riding in a service taxi, an army sol-
dier entered and took the front seat next to the driver. We stopped at a large
intersection, where a policeman was managing the flow of traffic. While the
traffic policeman screamed at the driver of a car that had gone through the
intersection without being directed to go, the soldier amusingly remarked
to the service driver, “You know, in America, they stop at the intersection
even if there isn’t a light!” The service driver laughed. This commentary
and others like it seemed to make reference again to a developmentalist dis-
course about where Lebanon is positioned vis-à-vis Western countries but
in a way that did not express feelings of inadequacy, but rather a kind of
insider-ness and self-mocking pride.

Samah, a young man in his twenties who was four years old when his
family emigrated to France during the long war, also spoke about how
insider-ness/outsider-ness is expressed and cultivated through driving
behavior. “When I come back to Lebanon, my friends are always saying
that I’m nizami [orderly/law-abiding] because I follow the [traffic] rules.”
In another example, a social science professor at a university in Beirut,
inspired by the many conversations we had had about my research, created
a final exam question that asked her students to discuss driving in Beirut
using concepts from the course materials. In their responses, many students
made reference to cultural norms and values, but, more than anything,
the students wrote about their sense of the sheer chaos on the streets and
offered interpretations of its cultural meaning. One student, for instance,
写了 about how driving behavior was a means of performing Lebanese-
ness: “Even if foreign people are not used to such a way of driving, they
have to learn how to drive in Beirut. So, by driving between cars, not stop-
ning at a red light, the person who is driving will be described as the ‘real’
Lebanese driver even if he/she is not as ‘real’ or from another country but
he/she will look like ‘real.”’

Sitting on a bus returning to Beirut from a summer concert in the moun-
tains in 2005, I listened in on a conversation between what I surmised,
as a result of their ease alternating between fluent Lebanese Arabic and American English, were two young Lebanese American men. Like the student’s exam answer, they talked about how a certain set of skills was required for driving in Lebanon. “The thing about driving here,” one guy told the other, “is that if you can drive in this country, you can drive anywhere.” In a commentary for the *World Affairs Journal*, American journalist Michael Totten (2005) elaborated on this sentiment by describing driving in Lebanon as a game in which “your reaction time—and therefore your driving skill—grows exponentially after you’ve played this game for a while.”

The theme of native or, for nonnatives, acquired, expertise and knowledge about how to transgress was a recurring one in the accounts about driving that I gathered during my fieldwork. As Lara described it, this was expertise in finding a way around, a way through, a way out. It was an expertise born from the cultivation of a particular set of skills of negotiation, in this case negotiation of Beirut’s urban space, which suggested not only cleverness but also resilience in the face of challenge. These aspects of knowing how to drive in Lebanon went along with the ability to identify and to make the most of opportunities and with irreverence toward forms of state authority that seek to limit or constrain public behaviors and practices. Thus, together with social class and the developmental trajectory of the nation, I found that at stake in the talk about the chaos of driving in Beirut were matters of national culture and identity. In ways that evoked Anderson’s (1983) idea of the nation as an “imagined community,” in which dimensions of social solidarity, rather than inequality and exploitation, are emphasized, people of varied backgrounds described the competence and skill said to be required for driving in Beirut as expressions of Lebanese-ness.12

In hearing these comments about getting around Beirut, I began to think about how driving, conceived of as practice (in the Bourdieuan sense of an action with a history), could also be understood as habitus, a disposition, as Pierre Bourdieu wrote, that is “collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor” (1977, 72). In the narratives about clever and self-determining driving behavior being Lebanese, everyday mobility emerged as a medium through which a kind of national habitus could be observed.
THE CULTURE OF CHAOS: DISORGANIZATION AND MORAL AND CIVIC PROPRIETY

Lebanese draw on the notion of fowda not only in their talk about driving and traffic but also in their descriptions of other dimensions of civic, political, and everyday life. Ideas about the chaos of being mobile in Beirut are thus situated amid broader understandings of social disorganization. For example, I heard activities as diverse as infrastructural improvements, mundane dealings with the bureaucracy, and queuing practices characterized as disorganized or chaotic. One respondent described how construction projects in Beirut are always ongoing and never quite finished because the different utility and service companies do not coordinate their installation projects with one another: “The telephone company digs up holes in the street for a month to install cables and then the holes are closed up; . . . the next month the electric company comes back and digs up the street to install something. So the street is always torn up!”

Religious scripture offered another lens on the moral and civic sensibilities surrounding driving and public behavior more generally. Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, the now deceased leading Lebanese Shi‘i Muslim cleric and spiritual leader of Hizbullah, gave the subject his attention. In 1995, he issued a fatwa—or formal legal opinion or decree—that called for adherence to the traffic law and the preservation of public space for safe and unrestricted civic usage. “Compliance with the traffic system,” he wrote, “will put an end to a chaotic driving which leads to the disorderliness of not only public space, but all aspects of people’s lives.” In the same fatwa, he also discussed the necessity of taking care of public space so as to ensure the safety of residents by advising, in particular, that owners of stores refrain from taking up sidewalk space outside their shops so that residents are not forced to walk in the street to get around the display of wares. He wrote that it was “not permitted for one person to behave in the streets in a way that creates problems for the movement of others, be it [by] parking cars so that streets are turned into garages or by creating obstructions that are not due to cases of emergency.” More recently, in 2007, Fadlallah issued a decree prohibiting the obtaining of a driver’s license by illegal means and, in the context of driving, insisted that Lebanese respect their health and safety and that of others. Just prior to his death in July 2010, he met with the traffic-safety organization YASA and “affirmed the
legal Islamic position that requires respect for public order and recalled his earlier *fatwa* stipulating the necessity of respecting the traffic laws.\(^{16}\)

These decrees conceive of driving as an act of moral citizenship. And, as part of the civic realm, the ways in which residents move through urban space—and prevent others from moving through it—are thought to belong, in Fadlallah’s words, more to the realm of obligation and responsibility than to the arena of rights and entitlements. A sense of constraint that comes from within, distinct from the external constraints exerted by the police and the state, emerges here: the moral citizen should herself strive for decorous driving, rather than expect others to impose it. The Islamic conception of *fitna*, meaning upheaval, disturbance, strife, is brought into play here. The individual must engage in a moral, internal struggle against *fitna* that is connected to a broader, external struggle against a more publicly related *fowda*.

Along with these religious framings of the disorderliness of driving and other kinds of public behavior, many residents of the city offered understandings of the chaos that drew on a secular framework of civic responsibility and ethics. Samar, a project manager at a nonprofit organization focused on citizenship education for children and youth, spoke about how upsetting she found the driving situation in Lebanon. While some seemed to celebrate the anything-goes style of driving, she viewed unruly driving behavior in a definitively negative light: “It really upsets me, and I’m sorry to say this because I’m Lebanese, but it really shows me when I’m driving how the Lebanese are, how they are opportunistic; it shows their ethics.” During our very first meeting, when I introduced my research topic to Maya, the working mother who ran errands by driving by, she offered a similar commentary when summarizing what she saw as the core issue undergirding the chaos: “We are enemies on the road. It’s a competition. Everyone wants to be first, . . . and even professors and people I know who supposedly have different ethics about citizenship, about civics, they do the same thing on the roads. ‘I have to be first’—we all do it.”

**THE CHAOS OF CORRUPTION**

During my research, I found that in addition to matters of civic responsibility and ethics, corruption was also a part of everyday parlance linking the chaos of driving with broader structural issues of social disorganization.
In July 2010, a Lebanese television news program, *Al-Fassad* (“corruption” in Arabic), featured as its main guest Ziad Aql, director and co-founder of YASA. Throughout his interview with the program’s combustible host and in responding to questions from callers, Aql drew connections between chaotic driving and forms of government corruption. “In a system where we have twenty cars driving around with the same license plate number and people getting driver’s licenses without taking the test,” he argued, “it is not surprising that we have ‘chaos’ on the streets. The numbers of accidents, the problems with traffic, these are problems of corruption.”

While the television program *Al-Fassad* provides a platform for citizens to air grievances about corruption in and beyond the realm of traffic, the Lebanese Transparency Association, a nonprofit organization, focuses on advocating for reform in governance and citizen behavior. In a meeting I had in 2010 with Badri Meouchi, the association’s executive director, he detailed their three key steps: raising awareness, doing research about how to improve the system, and making recommendations to the decision-makers about the changes that should be made. When I used the phrase *culture of corruption*, Meouchi bristled: “When you say culture it sounds like something that can’t be changed, something that comes from families and traditions. . . . It’s better to think about it as a question of habits, of practices. Let’s take the parking meters, having to park inside white lines and then get out and go and pay at a machine! I mean, come on, . . . this is something you couldn’t ever imagine Lebanese doing! But now they are doing it. And they like doing it!”

In this sense, to take Meouchi’s point a bit further, the chaos in Beirut could be contested through awareness, education, and the incorporation of new habits into everyday life. Curiously, in fact, Meouchi’s comments about Beirut residents’ reception of the parking meters, particularly given that any form of parking serves as a constraint on unfettered automobility, provide a counterweight to the discussions of Lebanese-ness that argue for the cultural authenticity of a mobility that breaks all the rules.

The pay-and-display electronic parking meters Meouchi spoke of were a recent addition to Beirut’s streetscape. The meters, along with the construction of pedestrian bridges and the installation of traffic lights, were part of the Urban Transportation Development Project (UTDP), an infrastructural effort funded jointly by the World Bank and the Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) to improve traffic conditions.
in and around Beirut. I met with the manager of the UTDP in Elie Helou in 2005 and again in 2010 at what marked, respectively, the early and final phases of the project. In 2010, after a conversation during which he spoke with pride when detailing the infrastructural improvements that had been completed and with frustration about the state’s inability to successfully manage and administer the traffic system that makes use of these improvements, Helou walked me from his office to the front of the building housing CDR in downtown Beirut. Helou, a garrulous presence, waxed contemplative when I asked him about the lessons learned through his involvement with the project. Echoing Meouchi’s sentiments about unforeseen citizen behavior, Helou paused a bit before saying, “You know, I really thought,” then, correcting himself, he continued, “No, we all thought that the parking machines were going to be the weakest part of this project, . . . that there was no way that people would use them, that people would hate them and complain about them all the time. But it turns out they are the strongest [part of the project], the most successful part. People really like the parking machines.”

Meouchi’s and Helou’s comments about residents’ use of and satisfaction with the parking meters gave support to the idea that the chaos of driving in Beirut was, at least in part, the outcome of a disorderly government that took little, or ineffective, action in ameliorating the traffic situation. Moreover, the order imposed by the parking meters was one welcomed by citizens, perhaps, I want to suggest, because they constituted a transparent, efficient, and predictable system. The locus of the system, in the case of the pay-and-display parking meter, was a technology that seemed to prove both gratifying and empowering for its users. Although other traffic-related infrastructural improvements, such as new roads, pedestrian bridges, and even traffic lights, gave the promise of efficiency, stability, and predictability, their success relied significantly on the efforts of the state actors to manage how these roads, bridges, and lights would be used by drivers and walkers. The parking meters, though also a technology of government that was part of the engineering of public space, afforded citizens a more direct relationship with civic order and regulation, one that was achieved through interface with technology rather than interaction with the human face of government. The parking meters, in a sense, created the possibility of a different politics of mobility in Beirut. In this way, sentiments about governance were manifest too in discussions of a chaotic mobility in Beirut.
Maha, a woman in her fifties who raised two now-grown daughters on her own, in summing up her feelings about how the state should deal with unruly driving, invoked the roles of parent and child: “The government is responsible first, not the citizens. . . . It’s like parents and children, the parents have to show the children the right way.” To extend Maha’s parent-child analogy a bit further, in the context of everyday mobility, an ill-functioning relationship between citizens and state was fostered by feelings, on the part of citizens, of not being taken care of by the state.

MOBILE AND DIFFERENTIATED CITIZENS

In *Flesh and Stone* (1994), Richard Sennett traces the historical development of the Western civic body. The movement of this body, set in the urban context, is a desensitized one, he argues; it is a body that experiences space “as a means to the end of pure motion” (1994, 17). In the Western context, he writes, spatial forms and practices that limit contact between bodies—and citizens—are both sought out and achieved through mechanisms of planning as well as experiences of spatial movement. This body, Sennett conceives, is passive rather than active, and the urban, Western citizen who inhabits it “wants simply to go through urban space, not to be aroused by it” (1994, 18).

In Beirut, I observed a different kind of civic body. Entangled in the chaos of getting around, the civic body in this setting was exceedingly active and, what is more, many of the Beirutis I spoke with during my fieldwork understood their movement through the city to be a meaningful aspect of their lives as citizens of the urban and national space. These understandings, I suggest, demonstrate that driving (or riding) is an everyday experience through which different Lebanese express and recognize shared interests and sentiments about the development of the nation, civic culture, the political and governmental structure, and the national self. And yet, while driving or riding was a practice performed by all, vehicular mobility was also an arena for social division and differentiation. While I heard consensus about the presence of a kind of chaos, for example, the movement of taxis and other public transit vehicles was often cited by those in positions of relative privilege to be both a producer and a product of the chaos. In this way, driving, as a specific form of spatial movement, had to do with one’s
right to take up public space and was an entitlement possessed unequally by Beirut’s residents.

In their talk about the chaos that characterized getting around Beirut, many residents described a national identity that involved the possession and demonstration of a maverick sensibility in the face of state ineffectuality, neglect, and corruption. The city, in this delineation of chaos, becomes a stage for the collective rhythm of different social groups, a site of alliance. However, narratives of getting around Beirut also revealed a city mapped by hierarchies of class and power. The mobility of the service taxi driver, for instance, was talked about by some as being the source of the chaos, and his lowly status and occupational maneuvers were thought to be a root cause of the “problem.” Those who own or drive private vehicles can get from point A to point B more quickly than those who take other forms of transport. But along the narrow, and often one-way, lanes of Beirut, the movement of service taxis and buses often impedes the movement of private vehicles. Thus we find, in the discourse about chaos, a key contradiction. On the one hand, talk of getting around brings together different kinds of Lebanese under a particular political imaginary: “clever” and “competent” citizens coping with a “developing” nation and incompetent state. On the other hand, distinctions among citizens, and their stratification, are engendered by this same discourse. Like navigation through the “secured” city, which I discuss in chapter 4, an urban citizenship differentiated by mobility and spatial access is also produced through talk of a chaotic getting around. In this way, being mobile in Beirut is a significant civic practice, one in which order and disorder commingle and various forms of boundaries, both social and territorial, are fashioned.