

“What Cultural Policies?” Explicit and Implicit Cultural Policies in Lebanon

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Cultural policies define a vision for culture, and provide frameworks for institutional practice to translate this vision on the ground. A 1981 study on Lebanese cultural policy reached the conclusion that one cannot speak of cultural policies in Lebanon if one refers to state laws, regulations and plans. However, if cultural policy was understood as the method of a state to give its citizens the space to develop themselves in a way that they could create culture, one could certainly speak of cultural policies in Lebanon (Abou Rizk). In cultural policy research, there is a distinction between explicit and implicit cultural policy (Ahearne). In this article, the concept of explicit and implicit cultural policy is applied to the case of Lebanon. The two terms are extended so that the former does not

only include cultural policies designated as such by the state, but also those created by civil society actors, and that the latter does not only include political strategies, but also practices that in the end determine cultural policies. Drawing on empirical research conducted in the context of a larger study on the role of cultural institutions in the public sphere, the power struggles between different actors involved in cultural policy making will be highlighted and the concept of cultural policy defined in the Lebanese context, which in turn will be positioned within the regional context.

Keywords: Explicit and Implicit Cultural Policies; Lebanon; Cultural Institutions; Beirut Municipality; Lebanese National Library

Introduction

“What cultural policies? There are no cultural policies in Lebanon!” This is the initial reaction you receive when mentioning to anyone in Lebanon that you are studying cultural policies in the country. People’s first thought goes to the Ministry of Culture and its perceived lack of action in the field of culture. However, cultural policies do not only pertain to the work of ministries of culture, but rather are determined and negotiated by a variety of actors and actions. Cultural policies define a vision for culture and provide frameworks for institutional practices for translating that vision to reality on the ground. Cultural policy is not only about the administration of the arts in a narrow sense, but it is also about the “politics of culture in the most general sense: it is about the clash of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations in the production and circulation of symbolic meaning” (McGuigan, *Culture and Public* 1). According to cultural policy researcher Jeremy Ahearne, in cultural policy research, we “explore those areas where policies (strategic courses of action) and cultures (embodied systems of attitudes and values) collide and intersect” (151). In this paper, the term culture is understood, along the lines of Ahearne and McGuigan, as the production of meaning and the cre-

ation of values, including letters and the arts, heritage and education, but also as encompassing the constant negotiating of often competing value systems. I agree with the editors of this volume in their understanding of culture as “dynamic, fragmented and constantly changing;” it is not a static entity. Cultural policies are those strategies and actions that direct the course of culture and guide cultural production. Ahearne developed a distinction between explicit and implicit cultural policies. In his article on the topic, explicit cultural policies are those that are “explicitly labelled as ‘cultural’” (141), in particular by governments; they belong to what a government “proclaims that it is doing for culture through its official administration” (144). Implicit cultural policies, on the other hand, are those that are not labelled as such, but work “to prescribe or shape cultural attitudes and habits over given territories” (141). Implicit cultural policy is “the effective impact on the nation’s culture of its action as a whole, including educational, media, industrial, foreign policy, etc.” (144).

One definition of cultural policy describes it as a “deliberate action in the cultural field undertaken by governments but also including business operators and civil society campaigns around the conditions and consequences of culture” (McGuigan,

Rethinking 144). Here the actors involved are related to the state, the economy/the market and civil society. It is important to add that these can also be actors devising policies and strategies to be implemented in another country, falling under the realm of foreign cultural policies or cultural diplomacy, or even soft power as coined by Joseph Nye. As Ahearne suggests, soft power in turn is related to implicit cultural policy if the latter is understood as “the endeavour by strategists to shape cultural attitudes and practices over their territory or that of their adversaries” (146), although the term adversary here may imply an unnecessary antagonism. One of the interesting aspects of soft power is that it is difficult to control and often gains its attractiveness by not being connected to government policies—at least not explicitly (Nye, ch. 4). Mistrust of the government is not only an issue when dealing with foreign cultural policy. In fact, together with the lack of cooperation between state institutions and the independent sector, it was one of the problems identified as cross-cutting throughout the region by members of a network on cultural policies in the Arab region (*Cultural Policy in the Arab Region*), which would suggest that implicit cultural policies could be more effective.

In the following, I will apply the concept of explicit and implicit cultural policy to the case of Lebanon, and extend the terms so that the former does not only include cultural policies designated as such by the state, but also those created by civil society and other non-state actors, and that the latter does not only include political strategies, but also encompasses practices that, in the end, determine cultural policies. By looking at different ways to talk about cultural policies in Lebanon, the paper aims to show the power struggles between multiple actors involved in culture and seeks to broaden our understanding not only of cultural policies, but also of the dynamics of state-society relations more generally. I argue that cultural frameworks are negotiated by a multitude of actors on the basis of both explicit and implicit policies, but also unwritten laws and practices. After a brief introduction to the prevalent notion of cultural policy in Lebanon, three case studies will be introduced to highlight different aspects of what determines cultural policies in practice. The first gives the example of the Lebanese National Library under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. The second focuses on the Beirut Municipality and two of its projects—Assabil municipal libraries and Beit Beirut. The third case deals with Solidere and its role in shaping

cultural life in the capital's city center. Finally, the paper will finish with a brief discussion of censorship in Lebanon.

Cultural Policies in Lebanon

A UNESCO study on Lebanese cultural policy starts off with a quote of an unnamed expert who stated in a report that “in Lebanon, there is no actual cultural policy, even though culture constitutes an undeniable reality in this country,” to which the author is quick to respond that such a reality could not be created without any political conception, however implicit (Abou Rizk 9). The study reached the conclusion that one cannot speak of a cultural policy in Lebanon if one refers to state laws, regulations and plans. However, if cultural policy was understood as the method adopted by a state in order to give its citizens the space to develop themselves in a way that they could create culture, one could certainly speak of cultural policies in Lebanon (79). By placing weight on the space given to actors to be creative rather than on explicit policies, Abou Rizk, in fact, himself distinguishes between implicit and explicit cultural policies. Although it was not published until 1981, Abou Rizk, head of the Fine Arts department of the Lebanese Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts, wrote the study in the mid-1970s just before the

outbreak of the civil war (1975-1990). It was thus written at the end of the “golden era” from the 1950s to the 1970s in which Beirut played a central role in the region's cultural production. His conclusion still holds true today, however, even if it might be more appropriate to speak of a *laissez faire* attitude rather than a method of the state as such.

The widespread impression that Lebanon had no cultural policy is undoubtedly also related to its position vis-à-vis other countries in the region, in particular neighboring Syria as well as Egypt, both of which have had dominating ministries of culture. While many countries have effective cultural policies without having central ministries of culture—such as the United States, Great Britain (the latter's current government department for culture was only created in 1997) or Germany (where the federal states have cultural autonomy)—, the regional situation where the state often played a principal role in cultural production and dissemination of culture led to the perception that only a strong ministry of culture could create cultural policies. Regarding non-regional cultural policy frameworks, the French cultural policy model—again with a dominant ministry of culture—was the most familiar one in Lebanon, reinforcing the existing notion about cultural policies. In 2009, the regional

NGO *al-Mawred al-Thaqafy* (Culture Resource) launched a project in cooperation with the European Cultural Foundation to research the state of cultural policies in a number of Arab countries with the aim of improving existing policies and creating awareness about cultural policies. The study on Lebanon emphasized the differences over what constituted Lebanese identity, which in turn result in competing visions for cultural policies. It also emphasized that cultural activities were not based on a cultural policy as such, but rather underlined the role of civil institutions in cultural production (Azar, Hamadi, and Merhi 5). Regarding outside intervention, Hanan Toukan makes the case for how cultural production in Lebanon is not merely a domain of contestation at home. She argues that in line with Lebanon's geopolitical position, “outside players make themselves felt via their funding, their visions, and their discourses and like local players assert themselves, directly or indirectly, through an intricate confluence of sect, class and geopolitics” (125). In light of the above, let us attempt to give some examples of explicit and implicit cultural policies in Lebanon in order to further explore the notion of this distinction, and what it means to talk about cultural policies in Lebanon.

The Ministry of Culture and the Lebanese National Library

The classical organ for explicit cultural policies, the Ministry of Culture, is a young institution in Lebanon. Evolving from the Ministry of National Education and Fine Arts, the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education was established in 1993, and became the Ministry of Culture (independent of education) in 2000. It was not until 2008 that a law was passed to restructure the ministry and redefine its organizational structure. Paragraph 2 of Law Nr. 35 (2008) on the organization of the ministry clearly lays out its responsibility for “drawing up a general cultural policy and coordinating its implementation.” Despite this stipulation, there is neither an overarching cultural policy devised by the ministry, nor a detailed long-term plan or vision. What is more, the ministry has a minimal annual budget, confining its activities to a limited arena. Among the main responsibilities of the ministry are the three public institutions under its umbrella, the Directorate of Museums—in charge of the National Museum—, the National Higher Conservatory of Music, and the Lebanese National Library. We will briefly look at the case of the latter to highlight some of the characteristics of the cultural sector in Lebanon. The Lebanese National Library (LNL) was established as a private collection in 1919,

becoming a public institution in late 1921—officially opening in 1922 as the Great Library of Beirut—attached to the General Directorate of Education. In 1924, a law was passed that decreed that two copies of all publications printed in Lebanon had to be deposited at the Great Library (Law of Legal Deposit, reinstated in 2008) (Mu’awwad and Wahiba 13; *Lebanese National Library*). Following the beginning of the civil war, the activities of the library were frozen in 1979 and the collections stored in various locations. Starting in the 1990s, after the end of the civil war and the creation of the Ministry of Culture, several plans were put into place to restore the collection and re-open the library, supported first by the French and then the European Union. Qatar has financed the transformation (restoration and equipment) of the former Ottoman School of Trade and Arts in the Sanaya quarter of Beirut to host the new National Library. While building works have been completed, the administrative infrastructure is not yet in place. The opening date continues to be postponed. The case of the National Library showcases some of the struggles around cultural policies, including the reliance on foreign expertise and funding, the lack of clearly allocated funds, the difficulty in passing a law that regulates the status and work of cultural institu-

tions, the competition between different ministries (such as the competition between the Ministries of Culture and the Interior over the Sanaya building), the reliance on private foundations, and finally, the lack of long-term planning, some of which will be discussed in the following. The involvement of a French expert mission of the French Bibliothèque Nationale—which in 1994 undertook a survey of the state of the library’s collection and of potential locations for a reinstatement of the library, and submitted recommendations—and subsequent expert missions were financed by the European Union (Perrin 69) and fell under the strategic cooperation policies of the EU and member states with what the EU terms the “European Neighbourhood.” Qatar’s motivation to finance the building of the new library should be understood as a part of its regional soft power initiative, in particular in the knowledge sector, and part of its implicit cultural policies aiming to impact “Arab” culture. In terms of cultural legislation, the law that defined the library as a public institution under the ministry of culture (*Qānūn raqam 36*) was only passed in 2008, although it had been drafted and presented to parliament under Ghassan Salamé (Minister of Culture from 2000 to 2003) several years earlier. Part of the ministry’s explicit cultural

policies, it outlines the legal foundation of the library (and the other two public institutions under the ministry), and includes stipulations for the institution such as “to participate in putting general steps for a cultural policy” (*Qānūn raqam 36*, par. 4). While this sounds positive in theory, in practice the fact that the library still lacks an administrative infrastructure—beyond a limited number of short-term contracts—prevents it from playing a role in contributing to a national cultural policy.

The reliance on private foundations can be considered one of the major implicit cultural policies in Lebanon. Within the region, Lebanon provides perhaps the most enabling environment for civil society organizations. The relatively liberal Ottoman Law on Associations, enforced in Lebanon since 1909, allows associations to form as long as they notify the government directly after they are created. While there are minimal public funds available, there are no barriers to either international contact or resources. Civil associations, while “vulnerable to becoming dependent on private funders and utilized for political or sectarian purposes” (“Civic Freedom Monitor”), in fact determine the bulk of Lebanon’s cultural life.² While not part of an explicitly labelled cultural policy, cultural associations are the result of implicit cultural policies. Even

one of the main governmental projects on the cultural front, the Lebanese National Library, relies on an association—the Lebanese National Library Foundation, set up in 2000—to communicate the project and raise funds. According to the scientific advisor to the library project, Maud Stephan, one of the reasons why a foundation apparently had to be created was that the Ministry of Culture, as a governmental body, was not allowed to rent a building for use as a temporary office and storage facility.

Beirut Municipality

Other institutions of public administration concerned with cultural policies are the municipalities, that can have a strong impact on local cultural production by providing an environment that is either enabling or disabling, for example through the provision of public funds. Beirut Municipality for instance is involved in a number of large-scale cultural projects, including the Sursok Museum, Beit Beirut and municipal public libraries. The latter are again a clear example of the importance of civil associations in Lebanon’s cultural life. Beirut Municipality commissioned Assabil—an NGO established in 1997—to manage and operate its public libraries in the city (*ASSABIL*). The driving force behind determining the strategic

courses of action for the municipal libraries is thus an NGO in cooperation with a public body. One of the main partners and funding bodies of the project is the French region Île-de-France. The French national commission for decentralized cooperation (CNCD) describes the project *Lire et écrire dans les espaces publics au Liban* (“To read and write in public spaces in Beirut”) as follows:

“To promote access to culture and information to the largest number of people, the Region Île-de-France has accompanied Beirut’s municipality for a dozen years in elaborating and implementing local development policies for public reading. The association ASSABIL is our historic partner in Lebanon, acting as the technical arm of the municipal institution for the development, management and animation of the network of public reading of the Lebanese capital.” (Commission Nationale de la Coopération Décentralisée, trans. by the author)

The project is not only part of French cultural cooperation policies, but also of the French linguistic union project, L’Union de la Francophonie. As the excerpt above demonstrates, Assabil was fully recognized as the operating actor. This brief example highlights the net of local official, civil as well as foreign actors involved

in the shaping of cultural policies aspects in Lebanon. Explicit cultural policy making is not confined to governmental actors alone, but can be formulated by civil society players to then be endorsed by public authorities.

The continued presence of former colonial power France in Lebanon's cultural arena is also evident in another project of Beirut's municipality, Beit Beirut, a joint project with the City of Paris. Initiated in 2008 following a cooperation agreement between the two cities, Beit Beirut—a building located on the former demarcation line between East and West Beirut—is to be turned into a museum, a cultural center including an archive for the research and study of the city of Beirut and should also serve as an urban planning office for the City of Beirut (*Beit Beirut*). Expropriated by the Beirut Municipality in 2003 after a civil society campaign to protect the building from destruction, Beit Beirut has also become a symbol of successful activism in heritage policies, one aspect of cultural policies.³ The municipality only started to appropriate the building and express a vested interest in the property after activists lobbied extensively against its demolition, for example through such associations as the *Association pour la Protection des Sites et des Anciennes Demeures* (APSAD). Although

some legal frameworks for the preservation of architectural heritage sites exist, they are often ignored or circumvented. Establishing a public interest in a building and publicizing it is in some ways a prerequisite for its preservation and a necessary means of raising the awareness level of the authorities (Brones 144-46; Haidar and Rayess). In her study of the Beit Beirut project, Brones shows how the process of first preserving the building and then turning it into a museum “constitutes a site for the negotiation of knowledge and ideas between various local and foreign actors” (140), and how both “collective and individual strategies” of the actors involved in the project “illustrate the tensions which exist between the official, but nevertheless inefficient public powers and the non-governmental associations in which those persons are engaged” (147). According to Brones, the decision of Beirut's municipality to expropriate and thus preserve Beit Beirut can also be “partially explained by the positive influence of Ghassan Salamé, the Minister of Culture of that period, and by the good relations of Mona Hallak [one of the main activists] with Yacoub Sarraf, Beirut's former governor” (148). It was also an opportunity for the municipality to raise its profile, which was weakened by the loss of the city center to Solidere (148). Varying levels of commitment—and agreement—of

the involved parties has led to some delays in the project, and it has not yet been opened to the public. This case shows to what extent the implementation of cultural policies in practice can be determined by contextual circumstances and the personal will of involved actors, and it furthermore highlights some of the processes' intrinsic struggles and negotiations along the way.

Solidere

Staying within the city of Beirut and its urban context, it is interesting to include another player in the cultural scene when thinking about cultural policies: the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, in short Solidere, which was incorporated as a Lebanese joint-stock company in May 1994. Solidere's reconstruction of Beirut's city center faced extraordinary opposition by intellectuals and cultural players in the 1990s because it was considered to be a project to abolish the memory of the civil war (and by erasing the memory it was renewing the civil war, according to Elias Khoury in a panel discussion at Ashkal Alwan on 23 November 2015). Having largely erased the traces of the war and then having rebuilt the city center, Solidere continues to control it. Since it dominates a large area of land at the heart of

the capital city and engages in a variety of cultural activities, it has a significant impact on Beirut's image and is involved in cultural policies, both explicit and implicit. Considering its conception of a number of high-profile cultural projects, such as the establishment of Beirut Exhibition Center, the branding of Saifi Village—one of the quarters in the Central District—as Quartier des Arts, the design of a heritage trail throughout the city center, and its ongoing project of establishing a City History Museum, it is surprising that Solidere has no unified cultural strategy. Its Events and Public Relations Department is working on ideas like the branding of Saifi Village, whereas the Urban Planning Department has been working on strategies for the heritage trail and the museum (al-Solh). While Solidere might thus have no explicit cultural policies, it is certainly implicitly shaping cultural policies in the area under its supervision.

By filtering and selecting which events to hold in downtown Beirut, for instance, Solidere determines the cultural life of the city center. Solidere is driven by economic and market considerations, which are then reflected in their choice of which events they hold and which artists they work with. In the words of one cultural manager who worked with Solidere, “they love everything that is foreign and established,

everything that makes money and looks good,” while not being interested in the experimental, unfinished, or messy. There was no space in Solidere for the latter. Solidere also has implicit cultural policies in their rules and regulations of what is or is not allowed in the central district, which directly affects the face of the city center. Visitors to Zaitunay Bay, for instance, will find an extensive range of instructions on what not to do, including cycling or shouting, walking a dog, eating food or using a transistor radio or water pipe. While everyone is technically allowed in the Beirut Central District, the presence of security guards throughout the area and instructions such as those posted at the entrance to Zaitunay Bay make some individuals feel unwelcome. The case of Solidere underlines the interplay of urban and cultural policies and further shows that provided infrastructure must be coupled with programming in order to create a vibrant cultural scene. Controlling the area leaves little space for surprise or organic growth.

Censorship

This last point regarding control brings me to a short discussion of censorship. Censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression are a major component of policies concerning culture. Censorship can be wielded on many different levels:

on the level of the individual (self-censorship) or a social group, on the level of an institution, or on the level of the state. In Lebanon, it is usually executed through the General Security (Ministry of Interior). As becomes clear in a study on censorship in Lebanon, explicit policies concerning censorship, as manifested through laws that have been formulated in order to ensure the exercise of freedom of expression, are often undermined by implicit policies or practices that “give influential parties and individuals the power to interfere and restrict” this freedom. The study further concludes that the “General Security’s decision-making process is partially influenced by the opinions of religious institutions and political groups” (Saghieh, Geagea, and Saghieh 7-8). Arbitrary judgments without legal foundations are, apparently, not the exception. While Lebanon enjoys greater freedom of expression than most countries in the region, many unwritten rules and effective power-centers impact the exercise of creative output in the country. Thus books, plays, events, music and other cultural forms are regularly censored. Here, the work of artists and civil society initiatives play an important role in highlighting and informing the public about cases of censorship in Lebanon. The NGO *March*, for instance, founded in 2011, fights

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for freedom of expression and against censorship. It has created The Virtual Museum of Censorship to this end, where a list of works censored in Lebanon can be found (*The Virtual Museum of Censorship*). The idea is to raise awareness amongst the public in order to create a base to “hold the government accountable for its actions and decisions” (*March Lebanon*). The arbitrariness of censorship is well illustrated in writer Lucien Bourjeily's play *Will It Pass or Not?*, in which he ridicules the decision-making process at the General Security. In the play, a young filmmaker is applying for permission to produce his first film and has his script cut apart by the official in charge, rendering it meaningless, only to then be granted permission after the official's assistant discovers that the young filmmaker is related to an important figure in the censorship directorate (Index on Censorship). The play reflects the reality that many cultural players must negotiate when applying for permissions, and it further highlights some of the subjects considered sensitive in Lebanon. It is a clear (and humorous) example of how policies and laws become secondary when other power dynamics are at play.

Conclusion

The use of the terms explicit and implicit cultural policy is not fixed, but is flexible. As Ahearne asserts, “if we preserve permutational flexibility in our use of the terms, it allows us to pick up more shapes and nuances in the messy and always rather ‘improper’ realities of culture and politics” (145). In this vein, the terms have been used to add depth to our understanding of cultural policies in Lebanon without any normative implications. The line between explicit and implicit can be fluid, but the distinction helps us to widen our scope when thinking about strategies and struggles for culture. The examples have been Beirut-focused, but conclusions can be applied to other governorates. The aim of this paper was not to be comprehensive, but to give some punctual examples of areas of cultural policy making and some of the actors involved, in order to start a debate on the re-conceptualization of cultural policies in Lebanon. I also hope to have shown that the conditions created for culture implicitly, such as the liberal law of associations, are a crucial part of the country's cultural policies, whereas some of the explicit policies—such as putting legislation in place—can be ineffective if practices are in reality determined by other imperatives.

→ Notes

¹ "Through its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU works with its southern and eastern neighbors to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration. This goal builds on common interests and values—democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion. The ENP is a key part of the European Union's foreign policy." ("European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)")

² Prominent associations include theaters like Beirut Theater or the Sunflower Theater in Beirut or the Istanbul Theater in Tyre; Assabil Friends of Public Libraries; the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts (Ashkal Alwan); the Arab Image Foundation; Zico House; UMAM Documentation and Research; the Safadi Cultural Center in Tripoli; festival associations like the Committee of the Baalbeck International Festival, and movements like the Antelias Cultural Movement, to name but a few.

³ According to Brones, architect Jad Tabet suggests exactly the opposite: namely, that the project in fact reflected the failure of activists to protect the city's architectural heritage, since the Barakat building (Beit Beirut) was only one of many other buildings that could have been preserved (151).

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