

Public Education: A Route into Lebanon's Middle Class in the 1960s and Early 1970s

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In Lebanon during the 1960s, public education became more accessible to members of the lower classes and different sectarian denominations, after a time when education had been, to a large extent, a privilege of upper- and middle-class Christians. This paper examines the socioeconomic conditions of public school teachers as a result of this process. Using Bourdieusian analysis, I argue that these teachers used cultural capital acquired through free education to become part of a rising professional middle class. To a large extent, these teachers' definition of their own social positions and roles was a result of their individual histories and internalized values.

Keywords: Lebanon; Education; Middle Class; Bureaucracy

Introduction

In 1962, Melhem Saliba—the son of a communist stonecutter—started teaching at the public school in his predominantly Greek Orthodox village of R'it in mid-Beqaa, eastern Lebanon. He studied for two years at the public *Dar al-Mu'allimin al-'Ulia*, or Higher Institute for Teacher Formation, after obtaining his *brevet* diploma, a qualification given by the government for passing an examination at the ninth grade. The school, which had been built in the 1950s, offered no classes beyond the elementary

level, and had only three rooms. In 1966 the school director, who was from another town, decided to leave and arranged that Saliba replace him, “even though such a position required *wasta* (“political connections”),” as he mentioned in an interview.

Saliba's teaching journey is indicative of a wider process that took place in Lebanon during the 1960s. Though the government never became the primary provider of education, public schools developed significantly between the years 1958 and 1970, challenging the hegemony of private sectarian institutions over education. Whereas these establishments, which were mostly founded in the nineteenth century, benefitted mainly middle- and upper-class Christians, public schools gave people from lower classes and different sects more access to education—something increasingly seen in the 1960s as a necessary asset for employment (‘Amel 25).

I will focus my analysis on one of the implications of this process—the socioeconomic conditions of public school teachers—mainly because the availability of free education was a self-feeding process. The public school network provided free education to a large number of people from rural backgrounds and with limited economic means, and then turned a large

number of them into new bureaucrats to staff its own apparatus.

By looking strictly at the objective conditions of teachers, such as income, one could generally describe them as part of a lower-middle class composed of “technocratic, managerial, and technical groupings that do not owe their existence to private property” (D.L. Johnson, 22). My focus, however, is directed at the process of these teachers’ socialization.

The testimonies used as empirical data in this paper were gathered from interviewees who come from a rural background, and became educated through public schools roughly from the 1950s to the early 1970s. All except one then earned a living by teaching, mostly in public schools.

The empirical findings that I have collected do not allow for description of public school teachers as “an actual class, in the sense of a group, a group mobilized for struggle” (Bourdieu, “The Social Space” 725). While an organized union movement did develop during the period under study, qualitative and quantitative data beyond the scope this paper can include is needed to determine if and how teachers were mobilized into such a *class*, as described by Bourdieu. The interlocutors, however, perceived themselves to a large extent as having acquired a higher social

position thanks to formal education they received in public schools. The educational system gave them an official legitimacy that granted them access into a salaried group of professionals. Such access would otherwise not have been available. In their new social positions, they acquired social prestige by virtue of their professions and had better economic means (economic capital) in comparison to others in the communities from which they came.

I argue that, through public formal education, individuals like Saliba were able to increase their level of education, or what Bourdieu calls their *cultural capital*, and improve their social standing (for the terms *field*, forms of *capital*, and *habitus*, I refer to Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 97-225). Cultural capital can be substantiated into economic capital—in other words, these teachers had secure jobs with steady incomes thanks to their formal education. But it can also provide “an individual with embodied social attributes that confer ‘distinction’ upon the individual and legitimacy upon the hierarchy of social inequality and the stratification of taste” (Moore 446).

But the social roles and positions acquired by the interlocutors, and arguably larger numbers of people who shared

their objective conditions, were also actively shaped by personal choices and motivations. Their practices took shape through a dynamic and reciprocal relationship among their dispositions and preferences they had acquired within their families or at school (*habitus*), and social factors regulating their lives, such as the official definition of a teacher’s role or the wage offered to her by the government (*field*) (Bourdieu and Wacquant 127). The importance of Bourdieu’s theoretical formulation in this study is that it transcends the dichotomy between objective social factors and individual agency. As we will see in more detail, while going through the process of acquiring new social positions, individuals often effaced the lines that the government drew in providing subsidized education and employing teachers.

Before going any further, a few notes on the methodology I have used are necessary. My use of Bourdieu’s concepts of class and capital to analyze socio-historical events in Lebanon relies on previous applications of these concepts on societies outside of France (Robbins 2004). Schayegh has also used these concepts to study the rise of Iran’s middle class in the early twentieth century and its relation to modern medical

knowledge (“The Social Relevance of Knowledge”).

Interviewees come from Muslim Shi’ite and Christian Greek Orthodox families; however, they did not mention their sectarian affiliation as an element of their identity. While I maintain that sects are not monolithic sociopolitical groups, and sectarian affiliation cannot be automatically translated into social position, it is important to note the following, which is relevant to the study of social mobility: Before the civil war that erupted in 1975, Shi’ites were mostly rural and the last to benefit from the Lebanese political patronage system. This radicalized the Shi’ite community and made it the main tributary for leftist parties (M. Johnson 6). As for the Greek Orthodox community, little attention has been directed toward its rural component. Salibi, for example, stressed that the urban mercantile bourgeoisie was mostly Greek Orthodox (213). M. Johnson also states that being rural is part of the imagined identity that fuels the Maronites’ “romantic nationalism,” as pitted against the Sunni’s and the Greek Orthodox’s urbanism (185).

Narratives were gathered through semi-structured interviews. My use of these oral testimonies is informed by Schumann’s analysis of autobiographies as historical sources, which understands personal ac-

counts to not be “transparent records of the past” (177). These narratives are not mere descriptive biographies. With the variation that the medium of recording here is not personal writing, I understand these testimonies to be shaped by the interlocutors’ “patterns of world- and self-perception or rather by their social habitus” (Schumann 179). Through these micro-histories, I hope to elucidate how both private and public factors interplayed to make the social experiences of these individuals an inherent part of the process of expanding the public education network.

But before taking a closer look at these teachers’ lives, I will put this process into economic and political context, as well as discuss numbers and facts relevant to it.

Public Education as Part of State Intervention

By the time President Fouad Chehab came to power in 1958, Lebanon—unlike other postcolonial Arab states—had not engaged in eroding the influence of foreign educational institutions (Roucek 439-44). Most of these had been established by French, British, and American Christian missions in the nineteenth century (Bashshur, “*al-Ta’līm al-‘āli*” 42-43), and they thrived because they fulfilled the am-

bitions of Christian communities to climb the social ladder (Khater 135). These institutions were left to operate freely after withdrawal of French troops in 1946 (Dueck 104-107).

Laws established during the French mandate after 1920 gave all religious communities the freedom to foster their own schools. Christians continued to benefit from a traditional network of religious schools, while Muslims relied on the newly rising government schools (Bashshur, “*al-Ta’līm al-‘āli*” 43-45), in addition to a limited number of private schools inspired by their Christian counterparts, such as the Sunni *al-Maqased*, founded in 1878 (Schatkowski 20), and the Shi’ite *‘Amiliyya*, established in 1929 (Atiyyah 149). Public schools, however, did not develop enough to meet popular need (Traboulsi 94; Dueck 92), which was still the case in the 1950s (Mughniyyeh).

The expansion of public education in the 1960s took place within the wider framework of Presidents Chehab’s (ruled between 1958 and 1964) and Charles Helou’s (ruled between 1964 and 1970) adoption of central planning and greater public spending, which amounted to a relative interruption of the *laissez-faire* approach (Traboulsi 138). Chehab was elected as a

compromise president after the short 1958 civil war, sparked by Maronite President Camille Chamoun's attempt to renew his mandate, which angered the largely Muslim opposition. The conflict also had social dimensions, since Christians dominated the middle classes and economic elite (Schayegh, "1958 Reconsidered" 432; Traboulsi 128-37).

Schayegh argues that political crises in 1958 and 1959—by relying on central planning—triggered a "single, region-wide process" of overhauling the state system in Lebanon, Syria (as part of the United Arab Republic), and Jordan. This process aimed to achieve social stability and stand against interference from neighboring countries ("1958 Reconsidered" 423). In Lebanon, the state had little control over the economy, and social services were being offered by either individuals or charity foundations (Issawi 285). Chehab attempted to narrow socioeconomic gaps by "adapting the free economy of Lebanon to minimum social requirements" (Salibi 223).

The government commissioned the IRFED, or *Institut de Recherche et de Formation en Vue de Développement Intégral et Harmonisé*, to determine the socioeconomic needs of Lebanon

(Schayegh, "1958 Reconsidered" 431). This was a French organization specialized in promoting development in decolonized states. A main challenge to development mentioned in the first IRFED report was the wealth gap between different social strata, as well as between Beirut and the countryside (*Institut* 17-19). To offset these imbalances, the report suggested both planning and state intervention as the optimal way for "integral development" (20). One of the pressing social needs in the 1960s was the expansion of educational services. Typical of the post-World-War-II era, Lebanon was witnessing a population boom (Murr 90). The population size in 1959 was estimated at 1.6 million—half of which was younger than the age of twenty. Social contrast was also very sharp, despite what was perceived as healthy economic growth; 9% of the population lived below the poverty line and 40% was classified as poor (*Institut* 93).

Political patrons harnessed support in the countryside during the 1960s by fulfilling popular demands for roads and schools (Mughniyyeh). Who controlled this vital resource was also a matter of local political contention: In the northern Christian city of Zgharta, the Duwaihis withdrew their children from school in protest against the opening of a government secondary

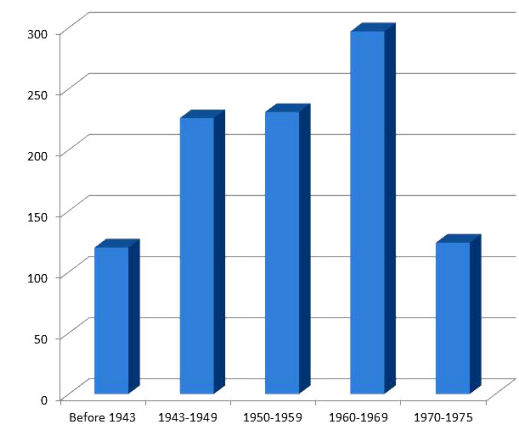


Figure 1: Yearly distribution of the total number of primary and intermediate state schools established in Lebanon.

Source: Adapted from Labaki, Boutros. *Education et mobilité sociale dans la société multiculturelle du Liban: Approche socio-historique*. Frankfurt/M.: Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung, 1988. 134-36. Print.

school in a district controlled by another influential family, the Franjiehs ("Āl Duwaihī").

Of the 903 public primary and elementary schools known to be built in Lebanon from that mandate until 1975, at least 26% were built between 1960 and 1969 (Labaki 134-36, see Figure 1), and only seven of these schools were built in the capital Beirut—less than in any other area of Lebanon (See Figure 2). Between the academic years 1959-60 and 1970-71, the total number of students at all levels in state schools

increased from 276,704 to 732,681 (Bashshur, "The Role of Education" 50), an increase of 165%. These schools, however, did not accommodate more students than private schools (See Figure 3). A breakdown of the student population in state schools according to religious affiliation, which dates from 1960, shows that Muslim students made up 65% and 62% at primary and elementary/secondary levels, respectively (Labaki 136).

Hence, a surge in public education in the 1960s produced the following outcomes: Relative to previous years, the state built a large number of schools to accommodate its growing young population. This expansion

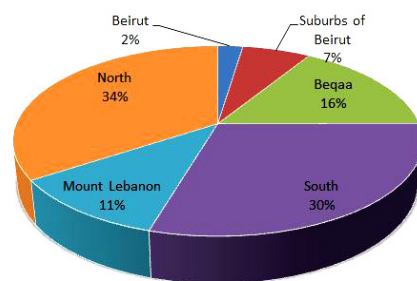


Figure 2: Regional distribution of primary and elementary state schools built between 1960 and 1969.

Source: Adapted from Labaki, Boutros. *Education et mobilité sociale dans la société multiconmunitaire du Liban: Approche socio-historique*. Frankfurt/M.: Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung, 1988. 134-36. Print.

sion mainly benefitted Muslims, and more generally the population outside the privileged areas of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. However, despite the proliferation of state schools, the government never became the main provider of education; private schools continued to accommodate the majority of Lebanon's students, and there were no reports of subjecting these schools to further control by the government. Furthermore, the government was still subsidizing charity schools, most of which were confessional (Atiyah 139). But even if the government never became the sole provider of education, its development of public education infrastructure provided impetus for the development of the teaching sector, which had a clear impact on class structure.

New Opportunities Shaped by Personal Choices

In 1959, Khuri surveyed the northern town of Amyun, and reported that the class of "needy poor," which comprised traditional peasants and sharecroppers, was shrinking (37). He noted, in contrast, the rise of a lower-middle class—which included many teachers. After World War II, salaried professions were replacing private property as the main source of income for middle classes in the Middle East (Halpern 50-52). The bureaucracy in Lebanon was in fact

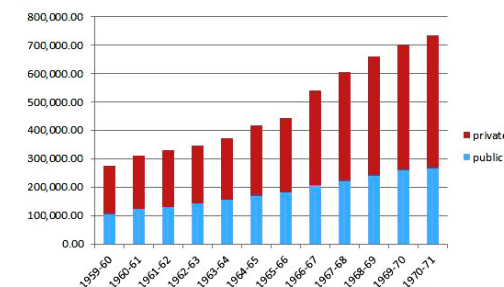


Figure 3: Evolution of the number of students per school type.

Source: Chart. Al-Markaz al-tarbawi li-l-buḥūth wa-l-inmā'. *Al-Iḥsā' al-tarbawi 1969-70*. Beirut, 1970. 16. Print.

expanding, as the state increasingly relied on it to implement its policies. The number of civil servants (not including the police) increased from 5,421 in 1947 to 14,800 in 1953, and to 17,562 in 1958, then jumping into the range of 26,000 to 30,000 in 1966 (Hudson 303-304).

The total number of public school teachers grew more than threefold between the academic years 1958-59 and 1970-71 (see Figure 4); yet private schools continued to employ larger numbers of teachers, as well. Part of the explanation behind the surge in the number of public school teachers, especially at the primary level, could be that teaching required little qualification. Out of a total of 4,435 teachers who taught at the primary and intermedi-

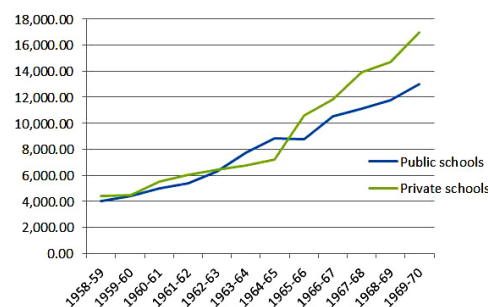


Figure 4: Variation in the number of public and private school teachers.

Source: Chart. Al-Markaz al-tarbawi li-l-buḥūth wa-l-inmā'. *Al-Iḥsā' al-tarbawi 1969-70*. Beirut, 1970. 20. Print.

ate levels combined, during the academic year 1970-71, around 87% had either a primary or an intermediate school certificate—and 2% did not even have a primary school certificate. Only 11% had university degrees or qualifications from teaching institutes, and hence could teach at intermediate levels (*Wizārat al-Tarbiya* 21).

To become a secondary school teacher, a candidate who obtained an official ninth-grade certificate could enroll at the Higher Institute for Teacher Formation and get a full scholarship. After graduation, the teacher would be compelled to work at a government school for five years (Asmar 20-21).

In comparison to other government employees, the rank of a teacher was somewhere near the bottom of the civil-service

scale. Secondary school teachers complained that they had to study for the same number of years as judges and public-sector engineers, and yet were paid woefully less (62). In 1965, for example, the maximum monthly salary of a secondary-school teacher, including benefits, was 1,400 Lebanese pounds (\$467), while that of a public-sector engineer could reach 2,407.50 Lebanese pounds (\$802.50), and that of a judge 3,025 Lebanese pounds (\$1,008) (61).

Between 1953 and 1966, during which time the living cost in Lebanon increased by 101%, the minimum and maximum salaries of secondary-school teachers increased by 72% and 31%, respectively (94). In comparison, during the same period, classified judges enjoyed a raise of 110%, which exceeded cost of living increases (95). Both elementary and secondary school teachers went on several strikes during the presidency of Fouad Chehab, through which they were able to improve their working conditions (141-42).

But beyond mere income, testimonies of veteran teachers employed by the expanding government educational sector give a more nuanced picture of their socialization. In the remainder of this section, I will present these testimonies to highlight the most important person-

al and objective factors that marked each of their social experiences. Bourdieu argues that “just as no two individual histories are identical so no two individual habituses are identical” (*Sociology in Question* 46). All interviewees confirmed that teaching could offer its practitioners a relative improvement in social standing. But individual experiences show that these teachers actively sought to define their own social role and position—some more actively than others.

Salwa Sa'd, from the Shi'ite village of Kaifoun in Mount Lebanon, studied in the 1960s at the local public school, but had to commute to the provincial center of 'Aley to finish her baccalaureate in 1970 because her village lacked a secondary school. She then obtained a bachelor's degree in education from the Lebanese University (LU) and taught chemistry at public schools. Sa'd did not emphasize acquiring a higher social status through teaching—yet she did not hesitate to say during an interview: “Everything I have, I owe to public education.” She said she could not have enrolled at a private school because her parents could not afford it, and that she owed the economic security she has enjoyed to teaching in the public sector.

While she did not stress the social capital acquired through teaching, Sa'd emphasized that she was able to have more access to economic capital thanks to her education.

Interlocutors who lived through an earlier period as both students and teachers in the government sector—a period during which qualifications were rarer—emphasized more how education and teaching were a source of prestige.

Munir Mughniyyeh, who hails from the southern Shi'ite village of Tar Dibba, humorously likened being a teacher to being the president of the republic, or even the conqueror of Constantinople. Mughniyyeh had to move with his family to the provincial center Tyre, where he enrolled in several public and private schools in the late 1940s, because the school at his village was very mediocre. Mughniyyeh taught for one year in 1954 at *al-Maqased* before studying law, and his two brothers, who are now deceased, also taught for a few years in the 1960s at public schools. Reflecting on how scarce formal education was, Mughniyyeh believed all three of them had been able to teach because they obtained baccalaureate degrees. Mughniyyeh's new elevated socioeconomic status replaced one that was fading

away; his family, which had traditionally produced prominent Shi'ite clerics in South Lebanon, could no longer rely on the diminishing profits of land ownership.

While Sa'd and Mughniyyeh suggested that they benefitted passively from the expansion of educational services, other interlocutors pointed to a more active role in defining their social status and role in their communities—albeit, different interlocutors had different motives.

Elias Trad from Deir al-Ghazal witnessed the transformative period of government education in the 1960s. However, he downplayed the effects that the teaching institutions had on his professional and social development. Trad stressed that his personal ambition was the main drive of his career, as he moved from teaching at the primary level to becoming a lecturer in English language at LU, before he died in 2012. He studied at his village school, then started teaching at public schools in the Beqaa province in 1969 after obtaining his *brevet* and passing the civil service examination. Trad mentioned that although people demonstrated respect toward teachers, they knew that the latter did not possess high qualifications. Trad continued his studies and obtained a baccalaureate,

then studied at LU, where he obtained a PhD.

Certain interlocutors became an integral part of developing education in their own communities. Rafiq al-Debs, a colleague of Melhem Saliba (whom we encountered in the introduction), hails from the neighboring village of Deir al-Ghazal, also predominantly Greek Orthodox. Holding a ninth-grade *brevet* diploma, al-Debs passed an examination at the Civil Service Council, the government body responsible for appointing bureaucrats, and started teaching at R'it's primary school in 1963. A year later, he moved to the school in his own village, which had been built in the 1950s. Financially, al-Debs described his living conditions as very favorable. He started with a salary of 202 Lebanese Pounds (\$67) "which could afford the best life for a family," then was happy to get a raise of 25 Lebanese Pounds (\$8) in less than a year.

Regarding his community's perception of his status, al-Debs stressed that people treated teachers with utmost respect. But there was something more than financial security and social status that pushed al-Debs to continue his work. He described teaching at public schools as a noble, altruistic profession, saying that he

refused lucrative offers to teach at private schools because he believed he should work to keep public schools superior. Al-Debs said that he and his colleagues did everything they could to provide the school with what it needed, especially additional rooms as it grew every year, doing more than was required of them by the government.

These examples all attest to an amelioration of socioeconomic status thanks to public institutions, where the interlocutors acquired free tuition and then an opportunity for employment, whether temporarily or throughout their entire lives. But two examples stand out in showing that individuals' social experiences could significantly differ despite similar objective conditions. This reflects how individual agency and internalized values are intrinsic parts of the process of shifting social positions.

While al-Debs and Trad steered clear of dissident action, and were active in a conformist manner, the following two interlocutors defied the government through political activism in the educational field. But while they both held similar ideological beliefs, they reacted in different ways, which produced clearly distinct outcomes in their lives.

Melhem Saliba described his family's social level as "below the middle" (*dun al-mutawassit*). His father was a worker at the local quarry but also as a *mukhtar*, an elected official responsible mainly for maintaining a record of residents. This gave the family social status that was not provided by economic capital. Saliba's father was a member of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), and he himself was a member of the party before he turned eighteen.

Like al-Debs, Saliba worked at the village school while it was still expanding. He stressed the fact that he worked in order to improve the school for the benefit of the "families of workers." He strived to secure a new building, and volunteered with other teachers to give seventh-graders extra lessons for free to help them pass the official certificate examination. Students whom he taught and who obtained the ninth-grade official *brevet* certificate were able to move out of the village and start teaching in nearby towns. Another source of pride for Saliba are the "dozens of doctors and engineers who consider themselves the sons of this school."

During the turbulent years of the early 1970s, Saliba engaged in several strikes—he claims to have been the only director in

his district to call for a strike, which aimed to increase teachers' salaries and guarantee their right to organize, as well as improve curricula. He paid a "heavy price" for his labor activism, as he was one of 309 teachers to be suspended for ten months in 1973, without compensation. He retired in 2004 after working in two other schools.

Saliba studied in the provincial center Zahleh and was one of the few who had received formal education. He said, however, that he never boasted about being a teacher, despite his humble social background; because for him, teaching was first and foremost a venue for serving his village. His modesty, however, suggests that it was expected of him to boast of his new profession, in celebration of becoming a civil servant and superseding his father's status of manual laborer. Saliba's testimony shows that he has incorporated the values acquired from his political upbringing as a communist into his career, and this remained an integral part of his socialization experience and shaped the way he approached teaching.

Sa'dallah Mazra'ani, another communist activist, followed an academic path that was supposed to lead into teaching. However, he chose not to teach upon graduation from university—unlike Saliba, who

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claims he never missed a day of teaching. Mazra'ani recounted that he enrolled at the LU's Faculty of Education in 1969, mainly because it involved a scholarship that covered his living expenses in Beirut. This allowed him to dedicate time to student activism, which led to his becoming the head of the student sector in the LCP, then the secretary general of LU's student union. He had dropped another option to take a scholarship to study in the Soviet Union. This had been available to him because he came from a family that traditionally adhered to the LCP.

After finishing his studies at the Faculty of Education, he extended his enrollment for a year by delaying his final thesis, then enrolled at the Faculty of Literature and obtained a master's degree in Arabic literature. As it was obligatory to serve as a teacher after graduation, Mazra'ani was trying to delay the end of his studies because that would also entail the end of his role as a student activist. When he was finally appointed as a teacher in the southern town of Marj'ayun, the war had started in 1975, and the government's grip had loosened enough for him to evade taking up his teaching duties—even though, as he said, he could have asked to be transferred to a safer location. Mazra'ani's ca-

reer continued along the lines of political activism during the war, as he took a growing role in the LCP's media organizations, until he became the vice secretary-general of the party in 1998. Both Mazra'ani and Saliba's experiences show that people at the receiving end of the expansion of public teaching participated in shaping the state-led process to suit their needs and visions, while at the same time altering their position in the socioeconomic hierarchy.

Conclusion

The social impact of expanding public education should be read contrapuntally, as both directed by the state and shaped by individuals' personal histories and choices. Some of the social agents I have examined here actively partook in the actual expansion of the educational sector and went beyond roles officially set out for them.

The government engaged in this process in the 1960s to not only staff its own growing bureaucracy, but also as a response to popular demands that understood the value of education in social betterment. Teachers were part of a new, salaried middle class—but upon further examination, their socialization experience shows that individuals at the receiving end were not conditioned only by socioeconomic

determinants imposed by the state, such as the salaries it offered or the cultural value it attached to their role. Trad's account of his career evolution stressed the importance of social prestige, which he sought to increase by relying on his own "ambition." As for Saliba and Mazra'ani, they both defined their social roles through political mobilization, which was nurtured and fueled by their upbringing in communist families. But while one saw teaching as almost sacred, the other avoided it. Each one of these interlocutors exhibited social practices that were the result of a dynamic intertwining of their habits, and the social fields in which they acted.

This study could be complicated to include experiences of individuals from urban communities or other sects, or focus on how gender interplayed with the pursuit of social elevation through acquiring cultural capital during the 1960s. Much remains to be discussed about how students of public higher education consciously engaged in their own battle to acquire educational services suitable to social mobility (Mazra'ani). Yet in this brief review, we can see that teachers actively molded their own social roles and positions in part by projecting their internalized values and aspirations.

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