

The Conditions of the Working Class in 1960s Beirut: Fire and Everyday Struggles in Karantina

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine the spatial processes of class formation within informal urban spaces. To do so, I consider Karantina in the 1960s, an outgrowth of one of the oldest refugee camps in the world situated in northeastern Beirut, Lebanon. I focus on the struggles of those living in precarious informal shacks, known as *tanaké*, who repeatedly fought against arson likely instigated by local landowners seeking to evict them. This analysis underscores the decisive role material conditions play in fostering class consciousness among a diverse population, primarily composed of factory and informal workers, as they assert their “right to the city”. I argue that these galvanising confrontations, experienced as recurrent displacement by fire, catalysed a political struggle that transformed this group from a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself. A socio-spatial analysis of the material living conditions of the working class, defined by everyday struggles, is essential to understanding political subjectivity.

خلاصة: أتناول في هذه الورقة البحثية العمليات المكانية للتشكيل الطبقي داخل المساحات العشوائية. أركز على حي الكرنطينا في ستينيات القرن الماضي، الذي نشأ نتيجة تضخم أحد أقدم مخيمات اللاجئين في العالم، الواقع في شمال شرق بيروت، لبنان. أسلط الضوء على نضالات سكان الأكواخ العشوائية، المعروفة باسم “التنكة”، الذين واجهوا مراراً حرائق متعمدة يُقال إن ملاك الأراضي المحليين حرضوا عليها بهدف طردهم. يبرز هذا التحليل الدور الحاسم للظروف المادية في تعزيز الوعي الطبقي بين مجموعة متنوعة من السكان، تضم أساساً عمال المصانع والعمال غير الرسميين، الذين يؤكدون على “حقهم في المدينة”. أزعّم أن هذه المواجهات المتكررة، التي تجلّت في عمليات تهجير قسرية بفعل الحرائق، حفزت نضالاً سياسياً حول هذه المجموعة من “طبقة في ذاتها” إلى “طبقة من أجل ذاتها”. إن التحليل الاجتماعي-المكاني للظروف المعيشية المادية للطبقة العاملة، التي تتشكل عبر نضالاتها اليومية، ضروري لفهم الذاتية السياسية.

Keywords: class, housing conditions, informality, fire, Beirut, Karantina

Introduction

On the evening of 28 February 1965, the shacks of Karantina were in flames:

Karantina, or the neighbourhood of hardship and misery, was the scene of a catastrophic fire, unlike anything Beirut has seen in 20 years. A fire suddenly erupted around 8:30 pm in one of the wooden shanties and started to feed greedily on nearby shacks, until it had engulfed 300 shacks and turned approximately 2,000 people homeless ... All you would see were poor people scrambling in terror as they carried what they could salvage from their belongings, and throughout this whole ordeal, you would only hear the sound of crackling wood burning and the heartbreaking wailing of children! (Al-Hayat 1965)

The dramatic description of this journalist is no exaggeration. Multiple reports corroborated the catastrophic scene, describing a fire spreading very quickly, helped by the preponderance of wood as a building material on the premises. The fire was like nothing people had seen before. Locals came together in an attempt to control the flames but quickly realised it was beyond their capacity. The Beirut firefighting brigade was promptly called in, and despite their best effort, three hours in, the fire was still raging. Tin sheets, a material used typically in the neighbourhood of Karantina to clad wooden shacks, prevented the water from reaching the flames (Habaki 1965). By midnight, three new teams, the police, airport, and Tripoli firefighting squads, had joined the fight. It took three more hours of combined efforts, assisted by a heavy downpour of rain, to conquer the flames, at 3:00 am on 1 March 1965 (Al-Hayat 1965).

Karantina—also known as Al Khodr or Maslakh, part of the district of Medawar—is situated on the most northeastern tip of Beirut. Initially one of the first Armenian refugee camps in the world, by the 1960s the neighbourhood had transformed into an informal settlement hosting refugees, migrant labourers, and local communities. The fire of 1965 was sadly not an isolated event. In fact, it was the second fire that week, following a smaller fire (Zartonk 1965a), and at least the tenth since 1960. By 1970, that number had more than doubled. Some of these incidents attracted extensive press coverage, while many more went unnoticed. Using archival materials as well as oral-historical accounts, it is possible to document the nature of the damage wrought on the neighbourhood by the relentless arsonists—most plausibly identified as landlords with an economic interest in maximising their revenues from properties occupied by shack dwellers.

Beyond the empirical description of Karantina's infernos as briefly presented below, however, it will be helpful for a holistic interpretation of this embattled neighbourhood to consider the documented acts of arson and consequent fires as means of class struggle in urban space—essentially, of the shack dwellers against the landlords. From a critical-geographical standpoint, moreover, the essential question ought to be, not merely what the arsonists were up to, but more importantly, how the “burned out” shack dwellers, despite being a veritably diverse population in terms of ethnic, religious, and national identities, managed to organise themselves and respond in a collective and coherent way to the efforts lasting throughout the 1960s to displace them from their neighbourhood. The narrative of this paper thus revolves around the struggle for the right to the city of Karantina's *tanaké* class. More specifically, I ask: How did the spatial and housing conditions in Karantina's informal settlement during the 1960s contribute to the formation of a distinct political class among its marginal working-class inhabitants?

In answering this question, the paper also intervenes at the intersection of two fields: urban informality and theories of class formation. I do so by demonstrating the value of informal spaces as terrains for class formation, particularly within the Global South. Building on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as more recent literature, I show in the case of Karantina the importance of material housing conditions to the production of class consciousness, particularly among subaltern classes. The heterogeneous nature of this neighbourhood,

physically and demographically, makes it an ideal, if complex, site to investigate class struggle at the everyday level. With formal and informal housing set in close proximity, a nuanced comparison between these two habitats and their inhabitants demonstrates both similarities and key distinguishing factors. Within the field of Lebanon studies, the demographic mix of legal citizens, refugees, and foreign migrants allows for a break from the dominant political-theoretical framework of sectarianism—the analysis of society along religious lines—through an emphasis on social classes, while highlighting the important role of non-citizens in the production of space in Beirut.

The paper is divided into three sections. I begin by situating my contribution within the literature on fire and arsons, urban informality, and social class. This first section also includes a brief historical overview of Karantina. In the next section, I delve into the specifics of the case study and present my approach to class. In the third section, I dissect the struggle and explicate its nature and outcomes. Finally, I conclude on the role of informal spaces as terrains of class formation. The data presented were collected during 17 months of fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2019. Drawing on a larger study which included semi-structured interviews with 177 participants, this paper focuses on a subset of conversations with current and previous residents of Karantina, local business owners, and multiple experts. These qualitative data were complemented through archival research in local newspapers and humanitarian agency records. I approach the question of class from a spatial perspective, rooted in the everyday struggles of the dwellers of Karantina.

Theorising Fires

Fires and arson have been theorised by urban scholars as tools for gentrification and urban renewal, particularly in the United States (Gottlieb 2019b). As of the late 1960s, displacements by fire, often targeting lower-income families particularly of colour, became the new method for slum clearance and urban redevelopment in major US cities. Scholars have documented the role of bankers and insurance companies in fuelling this crisis, while situating it in the legacy of redlining practices (Brady 1983, 1993), and understanding the racial ideologies motivating such state-sponsored policies (Ansfield 2022). In addition to the centrality of race, fires often reveal class disparities. Even more recent examples, such as the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017, highlighted class inequality in London (MacLeod 2018). Simultaneously, fires can generate conditions for new possibilities. In 1970s–1980s Hoboken, for example, arson contributed to the creation of a new professional class along with urban redevelopment (Gottlieb 2019a). Fires also fuel activism and unity amongst affected communities in their wake (Cornish 2021).

Fire has seldom been theorised in scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), despite its pivotal role in regional history—after all, the 2011 Arab Spring movements were famously instigated by the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi. Few studies have considered the role fires have played in the making of Arab cities, with the notable exceptions of the study of anti-colonial resistance. For instance, in colonial Algeria, the French used forest

fires to penalise the native population and create the “myth of Algerian banditry” (Prochaska 1986). The 1952 fire of Cairo, following popular unrest, was framed as an opportunity to remake urban space during the process of Egypt’s decolonisation (Reynolds 2012), and an act of violence against the city during its transition into a postcolonial era (Elshehtawy 2016). These studies portray fire as a tool for erasure, rupture, and hierarchies, but remain limited in scope and focus.

More globally, refugee camps and informal settlements have been well documented by the press and humanitarian agencies as sites of fires and arson. Often built with makeshift and highly flammable materials, such spaces are fertile grounds for flames. Despite the preponderance of these incidents, fires have largely been overlooked by social scientists, and to the extent of my knowledge, have not been theorised. For instance, a recent study in Korail, Bangladesh, mentions five fires within a span of seven years with no further analysis (Huq and Mir-aftab 2020). Other studies consider the occurrence of fire as a simple fact (Baptist and Bolnick 2012), an inevitability due to poor infrastructural developments (Ngau and Boit 2020), or a natural disaster revealing local resilience (Andavarapu et al. 2018). Yet no further analysis is provided of these incidents and their impact on some of the most precarious of urban communities.

The 1965 fire introduced earlier was neither an isolated event in Karantina nor in the country more broadly. In fact, in Lebanon, the practice of using fire to displace refugees dates back to 1933, when a huge fire decimated Beirut’s central Armenian refugee camp,¹ and is still predominant in Syrian refugee settlements today (Kwok 2019). In this paper, I build on the urban renewal analysis of fire as a tool for urban transformation and fuel for class formation and solidarity movements and extend these thoughts to informal settlements. I centre my analysis around the Karantina fires and the ensuing collective fight against this persistent threat of eviction. I argue that the shared struggle constituted what Henri Lefebvre defined as a claim to their right to the city and contributed to the creation of a class defined by the material conditions of their housing. The case study thus highlights the significance of examining not only working conditions but also housing conditions to understand the formation of political subjectivities among subaltern classes. It demonstrates that class formation happens beyond the workplace and can be centred around housing and fires.

Camp or Slum: History and Setup

Karantina, situated on the eastern tip of Beirut, is today bordered by the Beirut River to the east, a major coastal highway to the south, and encircled by the port to the north and west (see Figure 1). During the late Ottoman era, three key institutions were built within the neighbourhood and profoundly shaped its development and economic significance: the port, its attending quarantine facility, known as the *lazaretto*, and the city’s first slaughterhouse. As a note, the quarantine gave its name to the neighbourhood, now known as Karantina. The presence of the slaughterhouse attracted by-product industries derived from the meat business, such as multiple tanneries, a bone processing plant, cattle sheds and related markets. In addition, Karantina’s location between the port and the Beirut River



Figure 1: General map of Beirut with Karantina situated (source: author; base map © Mapbox, © OpenStreetMap)

rendered the neighbourhood a prime location for industrial manufacturing. Throughout the years, multiple factories sprouted on the eastern end of the neighbourhood, most famously furniture production facilities and the largest flour mill in the city—the Bakalian mill.

Karantina became the home and refuge to multiple lower-income populations due in large part to these institutions. To keep this burgeoning industrial area profitable, labour was required, ideally of the unorganised, fragmented, and cheap kind. The earliest populations believed to have settled in Karantina, sometime in the late Ottoman era, were largely Sunni migratory tribes. Cattle herders and merchants by trade, some scholars believe that they sedentarised in Karantina, attracted by its slaughterhouse in the late 19th century (Massabni 1977). Members of these tribes were the primary operators and suppliers of the slaughterhouse, and as such were known as *Arab Al Maslakh*—Arabs of the slaughterhouse. In the early 1920s, Armenian refugees were resettled in Beirut now under French Mandate. At its height, the Karantina camp hosted between 5,000 and 6,000 Armenian refugees (Kévorkian et al. 2006).

As of 1926, Armenians began to resettle permanently in neighbouring areas, leaving behind empty barracks in close proximity to a growing industrial area in need of labourers. Kurds, fleeing poverty and violence, were the first to replace them in the shacks of Karantina. They arrived in small consecutive waves from Turkey starting in the 1930s, and from Syrian villages after the 1960s. In parallel, Syrian migrant labourers flocked into this neighbourhood as early as the 1930s, albeit in small numbers, and in increasing masses following the Ba'athist land reforms in 1958. A small number of Palestinian refugees also joined after the 1948 Nakba, and again after the 1967 war. Finally, rural–urban migrants relocated to Karantina, particularly from the Lebanese southern border villages due to increasing security issues in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba and from the Bekaa Valley due to drought seasons in the 1960s. All these people, largely fleeing poverty and insecurity, resettled into the former Armenian camp of Karantina, and expanded it into one of the largest slums of the city.

Before moving forward, a quick disambiguation regarding Karantina's urban form is necessary. Initially, a refugee camp was established in Karantina under the League of Nations' auspices to provide emergency shelter for Armenian refugees. The League negotiated a deal with the Christian *Waqf*, a religious endowment, who was the largest landowner in Karantina. The church allowed Armenian refugees to set up one tent per family on their property, as a temporary measure (Keyrouz 2003). With time, the canvas tents transformed into shacks built from repurposed materials, mostly recuperated wood covered with flattened tin sheets (Assaf et al. 2017). These shacks became known as *tanakés*—Arabic for tin—in reference to their cladding. By the time the League's refugee committee had ceased its operations in Lebanon in the late 1930s, the majority of the initial refugees had been replaced by other displaced or migrant communities. With the departure of the humanitarian agency and the arrival of new communities, Karantina had effectively become a squatter settlement, built on private property without the consent of its owners, the *Waqf*.

The transition from camp to squatter settlement is important in this article for two reasons. First, it clarifies the proper description of the neighbourhood; in this case, I refer to Karantina as a camp until 1940, and an informal/squatter settlement or slum after. Second, the shift from camp to slum constitutes the setup of the central struggle of this paper, the fight over the land and who gets to claim it—the *tanaké* dwellers or the landowner.

Informality

Scholars have positioned informality as a central terrain for urban theory and political subjectivity. Particularly since the turn of the century, researchers of the Global South increasingly presented informality as a common urban phenomenon, “a way of life” (AlSayyad 2004), a “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (Bayat 2000), and another mode of urban production (Roy 2005). As such, these spaces have been considered productive terrains for the re-articulation of traditional notions through social participation (Miraftab 2009), and counter-hegemonic grassroots planning and resistance (Simone 2004).

Furthermore, slums have generated new political possibilities such as “survival by repossession”, a form of non-collective action by the subaltern to reclaim their right to the city (Bayat 2012), or new definitions of citizenship beyond strict legal definitions (Miraftab 2006), and a reclaiming of a “citizen” role beyond legal recognition to produce a future city (Choplin and Ciavolella 2017). These approaches acknowledge the agency of slum dwellers and perceive informality as spaces for alternative possibilities, spatially and politically.

In Lebanon, the literature on slums and informal spaces is further enriched by studies of refugee camps, as these two spaces often overlap. Scholars have indeed pushed against Agamben’s production of “bare life” within refugee camps and reclaimed political agency for refugees (Owens 2009; Peteet 2015), and have rejected the “refugee” label, finding it obscures key issues by excluding migrants and fostering discrimination and othering (Fawaz 2016). These questions extend to spatial characterisations, as scholars have questioned the distinction between camps, slums, and the city and proposed new terminology. For instance, Martin (2015) has proposed the concept of “campspace” to encompass the physical continuity between the city and the camp, a space where refugees, citizens, and outcasts meet and further blur the lines between legal distinctions. Once we move past these socio-political and spatial distinctions, a wider range of possibilities arises, particularly within these marginalised spaces.

In Lebanon, the refugee literature highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between space and political subjectivity. The work of Sanyal (2014), for instance, argues that by producing the camp, refugees become political subjects and access their rights at the conceptual, national, and urban levels, therefore articulating a politics at the margins of the city. Similarly, Peteet (2005) demonstrates how Palestinian camps in Lebanon can also be seen as an assertion of the Palestinian existence, as refugees creatively resist the apparatus of control through their appropriation of space. And a recent multi-authored volume is dedicated to exploring the multiple ways in which refugees have reclaimed their agency and have become city makers in Beirut (Fawaz et al. 2018). These works are but a small example of the possibilities provided when exploring refugee literature at its intersection with political subjectivity.

In this paper, I build on the informality and refugee studies literature, drawing particular inspiration from the research in Lebanon. As I will show, in 1960s Karantina, the distinction between refugees, migrants, and locals was secondary to the formation of a new collective political subjectivity. The neighbourhood hosted a community of labourers who shared the same living conditions and, through a shared experience of dispossession, were united in their claim for their right to the city.

Social Class

In recent years, the emphases in many fields including geography and planning have moved away from class analysis, a shift attributed in part to the post-structuralist and post-colonial turns (Herring and Agarwala 2018), and the rise of identity politics in the last decades of the 20th century (Smith 2000).

Nevertheless, some scholars have continued to situate class practices as inherent to spatial production (Paton et al. 2012) and have examined “class composition” more closely within urban studies (Gray 2022). Questions of class dynamics naturally extend to informal spaces, particularly when we consider their role in making capitalist development possible as its constitutive outside (Roy and AlSayyad 2004) against the backdrop of the critical poverty scholarship—alternative approaches to territorialising the study of poverty as a process of impoverishment through deprivation (Baldwin and Crane 2020; De Genova and Roy 2020). Indeed, informality is an inherent reproduction of socio-spatial inequality within capital’s logic and demarcates social distinctions and class frontiers (Müller and Segura 2017).

Latin American scholarship approached the question of social classes within informal urban spaces as early as the 1960s through debates between marginality theory and dependency theory. The marginality theorists described the formation of poverty belts around urban centres in Latin America as the “marginal mass/labour” (Nun 2000; Quijano Obregon 1974). In their view, traditional Marxist class analysis did not foresee the development of dependent economies and therefore notions such as the “relative surplus population” or the “industrial reserve army” were insufficient to describe the marginal poles. Similarly, dependency theorists believed that existing frameworks on capitalism should be enlarged to include dependent countries’ laws of development and a deeper analysis of colonialism. Marini (2022), for instance, introduced the concept of super-exploitation to describe the economic dependency of the periphery (Global South) to the centre (Global North), a relation of unequal exchange. This imbalance creates a super-exploited class in the urban slums.

Since this work by Latin American scholars, more recent research has broached the question of social classes in slums and camps. A common thread seems to be the agreement that such informal spaces offer a terrain for possibility beyond traditional class distinctions. Davis (2004) posits that under the conditions of late capitalism, a new informal proletariat within slums globally has come to challenge classical Marxism. This class, effectively stripped of its labour-power, has no choice but to relocate its struggle to the slum street rather than the workplace. Refugee camps have similarly inspired scholars to explore class. Abourahme (2021), for instance, building on reflections by Salah Khalaf, frames Palestinian camps as terrains for the creation of new political revolutionaries, and argues against classical Marxist definitions of social classes. In his view, the Palestinian revolutionary movement created a new political subject that was neither a peasant nor a worker, but one deeply invested in de-colonial struggle.

Karantina, particularly in the 1960s, had become the biggest informal settlement of Beirut with some 14,000 individuals (Mouvement Social 1971). The 1950s and 1960s were also the time when Lebanon was integrating the world capitalist market. Although the Lebanese industry witnessed only limited development during that period, it was still sufficient to drive migration to the capital, create poverty belts around it, and generate an uneven development of capitalist relations (Nasr 1978). My primary interest lies not in global relations of dependence, but in the everyday life of Karantina’s marginal working class. As I will show, the local community, stripped of its labour-power, was forced into a

struggle for their right to the city in the slum streets of Karantina, and thus produced a class. My analysis builds on the work cited in this section and is also, in a way, reminiscent of the socio-spatial dynamics observed in Manchester by Friedrich Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844: a class decisively shaped not only by working conditions but also by living conditions, especially the materiality of their housing condition.

Social Classes and Urban Studies in Lebanon

In the literature on Beirut and Lebanon more generally, class and class analysis first appeared in the 1970s. Prior to that, the dominant framework had been sectarianism. Two seminal works marked a turn in the literature by reframing the approach from sect to class: Dubar and Nasr's (1976) qualitative study of social classes in Lebanon, and the writings of Mahdi Amel (2011). These works influenced generations of scholars, and have led to a growing literature on social classes in Lebanon and their intersection with the dominant frameworks such as clientelism (Johnson 1986) and sectarianism (Majed 2017). Following this tradition, I consider the diverse groups living in Karantina as a united working class. I centre my work on the spatiality of class struggle, an under-explored dimension, and cut across ethno-sectarian divisions, thus highlighting the commonalities between the different groups of refugees, migrants, and locals.

Karantina is an ideal location to narrate the city's history from its periphery. This paper, and the larger project from which it is derived, bridges between two bodies of literature. On one end, it engages with historical work that primarily focus on space, exemplified by Hanssen's (2005) Lefebvrian analysis of late Ottoman-era Beirut and Leila Fawaz's (1983) exploration of early migrations to the city and their impact on its development. On the other end, it connects this body of work to more recent writing examining post-Civil War (1975–1990) everyday life in Beirut's suburbs, as Dahiyeh in the south (Deeb and Harb 2013), the southeastern peripheries (Bou Akar 2018), and Bourj Hammoud to the east (Nucho 2016). As one of the oldest peripheries of Beirut, Karantina is the interstice between the historical processes that bring together a very diverse group of refugees, migrants, and citizens, and lead to the creation of post-war peripheries where sectarianism organises everyday life. Through this case study, I examine housing in Lebanon, a marker often overlooked, as a key spatial mediator of class struggle and consciousness.

Case Study: United by Poverty

Karantina has been largely absent from academic writing and often incorrectly entirely categorised as a slum. A few studies, conducted in the pre-Civil War era, focused exclusively on the informal settlement within the neighbourhood (Bourgey and Pharès 1973; Jazra 1969; Mouvement Social 1971), but ignored its equally important formal housing settlers. In fact, as mentioned earlier, several small blocks of formal housing were interspersed in the neighbourhood. The first and oldest of these blocks included some formal development as early as 1921

and housed port employees. The remaining blocks were developed as of the 1930s largely by the citizen subgroup—primarily Armenians and *Arab Al Maslakh*—whose economic conditions had improved and who still wished to remain in the neighbourhood. These were low-rise multi-unit housing developments situated on small plots of land, averaging 200 m² each. These dwellings may have been owned by legal citizens, but they effectively housed a more diverse population of renters, be it Palestinians, Syrians, or Kurds.

Irrespective of housing form, the populations within the *tanaké* or formal housing often shared similar occupations, and together formed the essential backbone to the local economy. Between the 1930s and until the start of the civil war in 1975, the Karantina dwellers played a key role in the operations of Beirut's port, the municipal slaughterhouse, the city's largest flour mill, and multiple other industrial plants. In other words, they were the cornerstone of the capital's import-export and food infrastructures. Karantina, during that era, was a window into the everyday life conditions of an essential labour force that kept the city running.

By virtue of being a home to these multiple subgroups, who share the same living conditions, engage in the same job market, and co-exist in a restricted space, Karantina is the optimal case study to understand a shared reality of the working class in Beirut, across ethno-legal and sectarian categories. And as it turns out, in Karantina between 1960 and 1975, everyday struggles were a key indicator of social class. This nuance first became evident to me during an interview with an elder of the *Arab Al Maslakh* community, Abou Sayed, who grew up in the *tanaké* agglomeration:

Some people were better off, but not really rich. For us the richest man was the one who owned his house, when compared with the one who lived in a shack. *Stone or shack was the marker* ... We all got along. My friends were Armenians and Shi'a, we were all friends and we didn't know or see the difference. [As children,] we would create teams, one neighbourhood against the other: *baton*, *tanaké*, Karantina, etc. ... We had no problems, even between Kurds and Armenians. I don't know why ... maybe because we were united by poverty. (Abou Sayed, personal communication, 19 March 2019, emphasis added)

This realisation of shared poverty and space, I argue, indexes a form of class consciousness whose marker was one's housing condition: stone or shack, *tanaké* or concrete dwellings. These distinctions permeated children's games who formed teams based on their housing block within the neighbourhood, blocks defined by these same material conditions. Abou Sayed's short list is in reference to these spaces, *baton* and Karantina—short for *Hay Al Baton* and *Hay Al Karantina*, respectively—which were two concrete agglomerations, and *tanaké* indicated the shacks block.

On Class

In this paper, I adopt a history from below perspective and, following E.P. Thompson's (1966:11) work, approach class as it is perceived by the dwellers of

Karantina “as they live their own history”. In other words, class is the articulation of a common identity by a group of people who share a common experience. And a shared experience was predominantly visible amongst the *tanaké* dwellers of Karantina. During interviews, I heard multiple expressions of common identity and unity, such as: “it was a neighbourhood for simple/poor people” (HI, personal communication, 8 July 2019). Similarly, some spoke of a brotherhood between neighbours: “this sense of unity is what attracted people to the neighbourhood ... This brotherhood was an important aspect of our lives” (HM, personal communication, 18 January 2019). Another common memory was a sense of solidarity between neighbours: “we lived in a sort of intimacy or affinity. If one person experienced a crisis, it was as if we were all struck by that crisis and people would bend backwards to help them” (IB, personal communication, 8 July 2019). I also encountered many synonyms to “class”; when asked why he felt unity with his *tanaké* neighbours, one Syrian labourer answered: “maybe because we were on the same level” (SN, personal communication, 29 August 2019). Even accounting for possible nostalgia in these recollections, the overwhelming dominance of such statements in my sample was an undeniable proof of the experience of a “united” group.

As I will show, some Karantina dwellers were united by a distinctly spatial struggle. Marxist theory has always centred struggle in its definition of class, and Lefebvre is exemplary as a theoretician of the spatial dimension of class struggle: “[t]oday more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space” (Lefebvre 1991:55). The Karantina dwellers engaged in their daily struggles and understood their stakes in it with a shared sense of identity. But the struggle of poverty and self-identification were experienced in different ways by different residents of Karantina. In this specific context, the sense of common identity was, I argue, generated on the basis of shared spatiality, particularly when considering the *tanaké* and concrete subgroups, simply because each engaged in a different struggle brought about by the material conditions of their living arrangement.

The Confrontation: Playing with Fire

As mentioned previously, Karantina’s informal settlement was victim to multiple fires. One study reported five separate fires within a restricted perimeter of the camps in 1967 alone (Jazra 1969). The frequency of these incidents reinforced people’s suspicions that they “were sparked by criminal hands, simply wanting to evict them from their homes without compensation” (Zartonk 1965b). The arson theory is also corroborated by the record of the party who would profit most from these mass evictions, the landowner—the Tamish Monastery. In fact, the Christian *Waqf*, represented by the monastery, owned approximately 45% of residential land in Karantina. In the 1920s, the *Waqf* allowed Armenian refugees to settle temporarily on their property. But 40 years later, the informal settlement had transformed into an unwelcome squatter settlement. As per the Church’s records, published in *Al Amal Magazine*, seven out of the 12 plots they owned were “occupied” by wooden shacks.

The presence of these *tanakés*, extending on an overall surface of some 20,000 m² of prime land, was in fact a big opportunity cost for the *Waqf*, since “no income [could be derived from these properties] due to the presence of assailable wooden shacks” (Keyrouz 2003). If the financial setback wasn’t enough to cast incriminating doubts on the landowner, their post-fire reaction could shed further light: “a fire erupted in 1962 in Karantina engulfing several plots owned by the Tamish Monastery. This incident vacated the land and allowed the monastery to utilise it as they please” (Keyrouz 2003). In subsequent fires, the monastery went on to enclose their newly vacated properties with a fence, to prevent the reconstruction of shacks; and whenever large enough plots were cleared, they would automatically be rented or sold for hefty amounts. For instance, one property was sold barely six months after a fire had “cleared it”.²

From the landowner’s perspective, the burning of the *tanaké* shacks was releasing plots of land for development and income generation. For the local dwellers, the same incident translated into a loss of one’s entire belongings and a harsh realisation of homelessness. According to La Croix-Rouge libanaise records, the smallest of the fires affected some 250 individuals and their worst, the big fire of 1965 presented earlier, left 2,750 people homeless.³ Typically, the victims would be temporarily relocated to nearby state or municipal facilities where they would receive humanitarian aid and social support (La Croix-Rouge libanaise 1969). Simultaneously, negotiations took place. In certain instances, shacks were reconstructed in their original location (Al-Hayat 1963), while in others, rebuilding on the affected plot was prohibited (Ararad 1970), practically resulting in relocations to a different block within the neighbourhood.

An Everyday Struggle: Concrete vs. *Tanaké*

With every fire the *tanaké* agglomeration would shift to a new configuration as people resisted and fought for their right to stay in Karantina. One survey estimated that 51% of shack dwellers relocated at least once within the slum, largely due to fires (Jazra 1969). As a result, the informal settlement would be constantly reshaped. These ebbs and flows in the camp, following each fire, can be qualified as an urban struggle for space, for the right to inhabit the land, albeit in *tanaké* shacks. In his writings, Lefebvre (1991:386) explicates the nature of this fight, “[t]he city and the urban sphere are thus the setting of struggle; they are also, however, the stakes of that struggle”. And Karantina in the 1960s had become the site and stake of a struggle materialised and, ironically, brought to light by these multiple fires. With every relocation or rebuilding effort, the slum dwellers were producing the space, shaping it, and resisting eviction attempts.

However, these fires only affected the *tanaké* shacks, sparing the nearby concrete buildings:

[The] fire department seems to have been quick, but it remains a fact: almost all the “tanakés” situated between stone buildings and wide streets have been devoured by the fire. In fact, the real obstacles to the fire are not the firemen, but [these] natural barriers. Who was responsible for providing such firewalls in a neighbourhood that is so frequently hit by fire? (Humblot 1968)

As per this first-person account, the fires stopped at the concrete barriers, or the formal built environment. The fact that these *tanaké* shacks were surrounded by concrete, not only created firewalls around the slum, but also ensured that the most vulnerable would be affected by the catastrophe. And as a local news reporter put it, “[a]ll they had was a tin shack, where they rested their labourers’ tired bodies. Now they were deprived of this too” (Ararad 1963). The *tanaké* dwellers of Karantina in the 1960s lived with the permanent threat of losing their home.

These fires were also perceived as moments of confrontation. The hostility was clearly expressed in local recollections of these incidents, such as Raheel’s account:

The entire land belonged to the Maronite church. We had many confrontations with the church, they were the ones that started the fires to kick us out. [Once, a fire] happened in the nearby Palestinian agglomeration, that fire was headed towards our block, but we halted it before it did. These people [victims of the fire] lost everything, but they rebuilt later. They [the Maronite church] would send bullies to our block to try and evict us, but we would refuse. (Raheel H, personal communication, 16 February 2019)

In his description, the fire was the tool used for eviction, as much as the bullies he mentions. The struggle then takes another dimension, a material one: fighting the actual flames and halting them before they reach their section of the agglomeration. This fight, experienced in its plurality, was a fight against injustice, against bullies armed with fire; and in response, the *tanaké* dwellers stood their ground and refused to leave. The Karantina fires illuminate the variegated experience of the working class. Shack dwellers believed in and lived through the collective, largely brought together by this common threat of burning flames.

A distinct sense of solidarity amongst Karantina’s most vulnerable was corroborated by the formal concrete housing dwellers who distinguished themselves and their experiences. For instance, Mahdi, who grew up in formal housing, put it this way: “The *tanaké* nearby were for the strangers who wanted to work in the port. But we were in the concrete block, 120 plots, we were amongst the [concrete] buildings. House of Khatib, Assaf, Zreikat, Diab, etc. all owners” (Mahdi D, personal communication, 19 February 2019). Mahdi’s description makes a clear distinction between the owners of the concrete buildings, whose names he could remember, and the strangers who lived in the shacks. Mahdi went on to refer to them as “outsiders” that couldn’t afford anything else. This feeling was shared among concrete dwellers, who didn’t feel concerned by these incidents. Indeed, the fires only affected “the others” as per Imad’s statement: “The fires happened in the ... workers’ district ... No, it was the labourers who would work in the dump and construction work. They couldn’t afford rent. And because it was *tanak*, it all caught fire” (Imad A, personal communication, 21 February 2019). A clear correlation between their status as successful property owners was visible, a distinct identity sharply contrasting with that of the *tanaké* dwellers. The latter was a distinct group, who had to grapple with fires due to the form of their housing. The population of Karantina was effectively divided in two, those who lived in concrete housing and those who lived in *tanaké* shacks (see Figure 2).

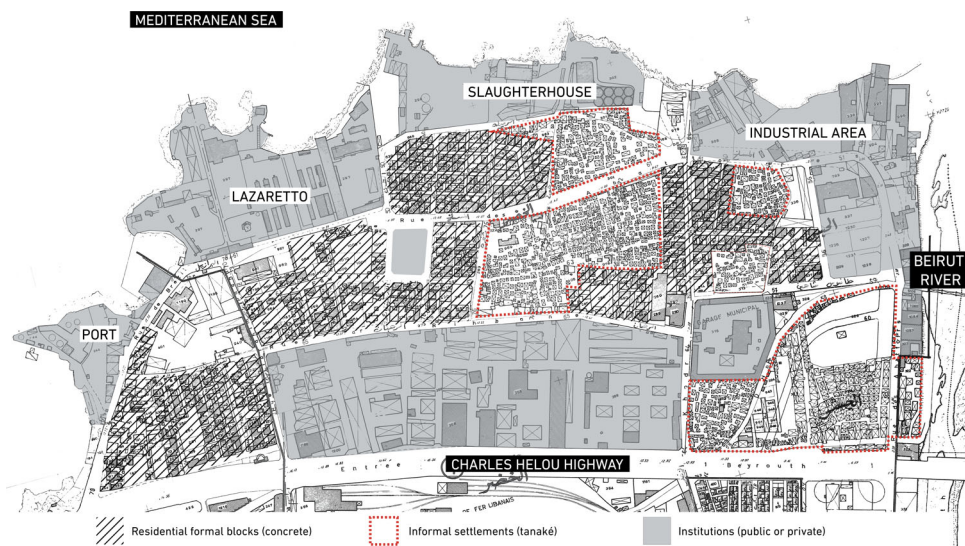


Figure 2: Mapping of concrete vs. *tanaké* on cadastral section of Karantina in 1966 (source: author; base map: excerpt from the 1966 cadastral records, IFPO Beirut archives)

The *Tanaké* Class

According to Thompson (1966), class is defined based on a common experience and identity articulated as a result of a shared interest against an opposed group. The fires were shedding light onto the defining elements of a nascent class. Karantina's working class included two groups: the workers living in *tanaké* who were compelled to struggle against a constant threat of eviction posed by the landowners, their opposed group and primary class enemy; and the workers living in formal housing who did not share this existential experience by virtue of their living conditions. Despite sharing similar working and socio-economic conditions, the primary marker of these two groups within the working class was derived from the material conditions of their housing. In this case, I am particularly interested in the formation of the *tanaké* class, one, I argue, sparked by these multiple fires. To do so, I consider Sartre's (2004) concept of seriality, the state of atomised life under the capitalist mode of production, where people live in simultaneous isolation and uniformity with everyone else. Seriality is best depicted through examples of mundane acts performed in the "industrial civilisation", such as waiting for the bus. As individuals wait for their bus they behave uniformly, and despite this commonality, they live this shared experience separately. This statistical anonymity corresponds to seriality and creates alterity or otherness. But when faced with a common danger or need, these series can form a genuine or "fused" group and regain autonomy in a new form of unity and solidarity.

In Karantina, the fires represented the shared menace that could turn a disparate series into a fused group, a united entity fighting a common enemy: the landowners. Both concrete and *tanaké* dwellers formed the essential workforce of the neighbourhood, its working class. But distinct shared experiences created two

groups within this local working class, not according to ethno-national or legal categories, or a specific relation to the means of production, but rather with substantive reference to the material conditions of their housing. The group, in Sartre's work, initially forms against a menace, but as it produces its own common objectives, it interiorises its unity and liberates itself from the dependence on a third party to exist. Or, in Lukácsian terms, the proletariat would transition from a class "in itself" to become a class "for itself" (Lukács 1968). The fires in Karantina revealed the presence of a new fused group, a class in itself: the *tanaké* subaltern class.

The division between *tanaké* and concrete is not limited to Karantina. Zinco, in vernacular Arabic meaning corrugated metal or zinc sheets, the modern replacement of *tanaké*, is still predominant in refugee camps (Dalal 2022), even becoming a symbol of the Palestinian camp (Abourahme 2015), and a marker of territorial stigma and social marginality (Knudsen 2016). In such contexts, concrete or cement stand as the antithesis to Zinco, a means to defy its temporariness. In Mozambique, the evolution from reed shacks to concrete houses is a materialisation of local aspirations and a symbol for decolonisation (Morton 2019). In India, cement, as opposed to traditional mud houses, forged a new class-based identity, sometimes breaking caste-based oppression (Menon 2023). Similarly, in the West Bank, cement "'concretises' presence in the camp, and welds futures and fates to its built environment, exacerbating tensions between rootedness and return" (Abourahme 2015:214). In these examples, political subjectivity and materiality of the built environment were mutually constitutive.

In Karantina, a co-constitutive relation between materiality and class was in effect. Although, unlike the examples cited above, it was not due to the transformation of *tanaké* shacks into concrete houses, but rather because these two forms of housing co-existed, side by side. The distinction between concrete and *tanaké* translated into a class distinction, made on the basis of the different struggles rooted in the material nature of housing. The *tanaké* class relocated its struggle to the street where a common fight created a new political subject. In his writing on the camp as a commune, Abourahme (2021) explains that the Palestinian people, faced with the material reality of the camp, had no other choice but to transform and activate the space into a political space. Similarly, the repetitive fires in Karantina forced *tanaké* dwellers into a shared struggle. The cyclical unmaking and making of the shacks transformed both space and subject into a coherent class.

A sense of solidarity seeped into the everyday lives of *tanaké* dwellers. The Karantina slum was, according to a local schoolmaster, the refuge of all those who society had excluded:

The vast majority of the inhabitants of this region were poor and destitute, as their homes were made of tin and wood, who left their cities and villages and took refuge in this neighbourhood to earn a living. Despite that, people lived in an atmosphere of love, safety, and cooperation among them, despite this strange mixture of people. (Khaled, personal communication, 19 August 2019)

Khaled's statement suggests a contradiction—an unexpected unity among what was perceived as a "strange mixture of people" struck by the same condition of

poverty. Excluded from the rest of the city, Karantina became a refuge and a place of cooperation for the most destitute, centred around their makeshift homes of tin and wood. Jazra (1969) documented multiple instances of material solidarity within the informal settlement, such as local markets allowing customers to keep open tabs and people lending money to one another despite their own financial struggles. These practices, and many others remembered by locals, created the atmosphere of love, safety, and cooperation, specifically among the *tanaké* dwellers. And with time, these solidarities extended into political actions and consciousness, namely around the Palestinian cause:

In this shantytown, they [Palestinians] cohabit with groups in their same situation, with whom strong solidarity ties will form over time. These ties will extend slowly into the political domain, particularly around political mobilisations that will emerge amongst the Shi'a that came from the Bekaa and the South. Palestinians are safe in this space at the margins of the city where they do not need to justify their situation. (Sfeir 2005:589)

The distinction within Karantina's working class happened experientially, on the basis of their daily struggles. The concrete dwellers did not have to engage in the anti-eviction fight while *tanaké* dwellers did, by virtue of their housing's vulnerability to fire. In its spatial aspect, the specific struggle of this sub-group fighting to preserve their right to stay on this land is a fight for their collective right to the city. Lefevre (1973:163) qualified these actions as a legitimate claim for their right to the city, a refusal of "discriminatory and segregational organisation" of the urban reality. And in this case, the *tanaké* struggle against fires—the shared fight for a common right to the city—was not only actively producing and shaping the space of Karantina's informal settlement but also producing a class, the *tanaké* class.

Conclusion

Through the example of Karantina's informal settlement in the 1960s, I have demonstrated how the living conditions of a specific group of labourers fused them into a class, in the course of their struggle for their right to the city. In this scenario, the landowner emerged as their natural opponent, allegedly wanting to remedy an infraction to their property. The struggle materialised spatially and was brought to light by multiple fires, menacing the informal settlement dwellers of forceful evictions. By virtue of living in a highly flammable shack, a housing form more vulnerable to arson than nearby concrete dwellings, the *tanaké* inhabitants were *de facto* engaged in a fight for their right to stay in Karantina, as a collective. These daily experiences in urban space—in the form of housing, formal and informal—animated class struggle in its lived dimension; a struggle that can also be seen in its spatial aspect as a struggle for their collective right to the city. In the 1960s, Karantina had become ground zero for the making of the *tanaké* class.

Karantina illustrates the centrality of space to class formation among marginalised groups, particularly everyday urban experiences within informal settlements and slums. Additionally, it underscores the significance of examining not only working conditions but also living conditions to understand the formation of political

subjectivities among subaltern classes. More specifically, in 1960s Beirut, the struggles brought about by poor housing conditions fused a group into a political class, a class for itself. The *tanaké* dwellers began to envision themselves as part of a collective, a group experiencing misery, unlike nearby neighbours, as a consequence of having to resist and mitigate multiple fires. The case study thus engages with recent scholarship that questions two prevailing assumptions: first, that class is primarily defined by a group's position within the relations of production; and second, that the workplace is the primary, if not exclusive, place for the emergence of working-class solidarity. A situated analysis of the social structure, grounded in the empirical reality of the Karantina neighbourhood in the 1960s, points specifically to the centrality of housing materiality for the emergence of subaltern classes.

Within Lebanon, Karantina also situates post-Civil War work on class in informal spaces and camps in their historical context. Recent studies of refugees and migrants in Lebanon show how both groups are increasingly governed based on neoliberal interests (Martin 2015), how spatial segregation between encampment and non-encampment is used to control this "surplus labour" (Turner 2015), and how the sectarian system has become an inevitability for refugees (Wane and Larkin 2024). A socio-spatial study of Karantina in the 1960s situates these findings in their local genealogy, at the onset of the integration of Lebanon's economy in the world market and the increased need for cheap surplus labour. This case study serves as a reminder of a time before sectarianism became inescapable and neoliberalism so dominant, a time when class solidarity was still possible across ethno-legal groups.

Finally, this study also highlights the political potential of informal urban spaces. Karantina is not unique, neither in its urban form nor in the nature of its political struggle. Fires and other such "disasters" notoriously displace people in slums around the world. A class analysis of such spaces only adds critical insight to the growing literature on informality. Moreover, the Karantina fires of the 1960s highlight the everyday life dimension of class struggle, and the significance of urban space in politics, especially in the quest for the right to the city—the production of class consciousness and solidarity.

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Endnotes

¹ Nansen International Office for Refugees, "Report on the Fifteenth Session by the Finance Commission", 1933 (United Nations Archives, R5614/20A/2525/686).

² Sales contract between the Mariamite Maronite Order and Antoine Rizkallah Kababeh, 23 November 1968 (Records plot 972, Folder I, Records of the Directorate of Land Registration and Cadastre Beirut, Lebanon).

³ La Croix-Rouge libanaise, "Revue", 1963–1970 (SNL/PER and SNL/LB, International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] Library, Geneva, Switzerland).

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