Paper's title:

“It’s Not About Politics, It’s Social: Student Elections in Lebanon as a Positioning Ritual”

Abstract:

Student activism in Lebanon reaches its climax every year, at the time of university elections. Dominated by parties strongly implanted in the universities, these ballots continue to echo the fragmentations of a divided society in which political groups articulate social cleavages. Incorporating sectarian affiliations as well as rivalries inherited from the civil war (1975-1990), these distinctions strongly frame the collective actions organized yearly. Starting from the close observation over several years of these mobilizations in two of Beirut’s main universities (the American University of Beirut and the Saint-Joseph University), this paper proposes to explore how such collective actions provide a concrete scene for constructing and expressing social identifications and boundaries. Interactional rituals as they involve the joint participation of multiple actors and precisely exist because of this conjunct contribution, these mobilizations can be analyzed in the perspective of the “sociology of the circumstances”, which focuses on the emergence and the diffusion of meaning built by the interplay between actors. During the electoral campaign, partisan labels override all other identifications in the interactions between students as each party rallies networks of activists whose repertoires of action are invariably supported by interrelated but distinctive storylines aiming at distributing the participants in a social map organized along exclusive partisan boundaries. At the end of the process, the pinnacle of the mobilization is reached during the announcement of the results when rival groups confront each other identity narratives, symbolically affirming the cleavage of the Lebanese society between irreconcilable segments. Consequently, these collective mobilizations seem to constitute a “key institution” as defined by Geertz, a space of construction and affirmation of a grammar of the social that emphasize intergroup fragmentation. Thus they offer a paradigmatic example of the on-going construction of bonds and boundaries in a divided society.
In Lebanon, university spaces are composed of a myriad of faculties and institutes, some of which host no more than a few dozens of students\(^1\). As a whole, the Lebanese higher education sector is composed of forty-three institutions, most of them being recent, established after the end of the Lebanese wars in 1990. In 1991, Lebanon totaled seven universities and fifteen institutes. In the year 2000, there were twenty-four universities and nineteen institutes\(^2\). Apart from the national Lebanese University (LU), all of these are private institutions. Operated in a field already characterized by the divisions between the multiplicity of private – and often communal – schools, this extreme fragmentation originated mainly in a political will inspired by the successive governments headed by Rafiq Hariri in the 1990 decade. Higher education seemed then considered as a merchant good like another, some institutions being suspected to be more concerned with commercial exploitation than with educational standards (Davie 1997, p. 9; Zoaeter, Nasr &Basbous 2002, p. 11).

However, the division of the university spaces goes beyond the multiplication of educational institutions. The situation in fact underlines the continuous setback of the Lebanese state in the field of education facing the influence of private and communal forces\(^3\). The 1961 law organizing the activities of universities warrants the liberty of education for the various communal forces, consecrating a constitutional principle and maintaining a situation well anchored in the history of the country\(^4\). In fact, along with the sectarian definition of personal civil status, freedom of education stands as the pillar of the Lebanese consociational system (Messara 1994). Educational networks have worked as one of the main instrument of the religious, social, and political construction of communal preeminence in the Lebanese scene. Taking advantage of the weakness – and even, during the 1975-1990 wars, the breakdown – of the state in Lebanon, and exploiting the permeability between religious and political spheres, sectarian and partisan actors used schools and universities as a means of consolidation and mobilization\(^5\). This historical process, associated with

\(^1\) Complete figures on the number of students registered in all the institutions of higher education are available for the academic year 2007-2008 produced by Lebanese Center for Educational Research and Development, depending from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (cited in the report of the Central Administration of Statistics, Statistical Yearbook 2008, p. 911-912). Online figures are also available for the academic year 2005-2006. See: [http://www.localiban.org/IMG/pdf/Effectif_des_Instituts_Enseignement_Superieur.pdf](http://www.localiban.org/IMG/pdf/Effectif_des_Instituts_Enseignement_Superieur.pdf) [August 2012]. However, these statistics have to be considered with caution. First because the method used is not detailed. Second, because some students are sometimes registered in several faculties at the same time, especially in the Lebanese University where the inscription is almost free of charge. Consequently, they may have been counted more than once.


\(^3\) For more details on the structuration of the Lebanese educational field, see Favier 2004, p. 59-99.

\(^4\) Article 10 of the revised Lebanese constitution of 1990 – originally adopted in the 1926 constitution – states that: “Education is free insofar as it is not contrary to public order and morals and does not interfere with the dignity of any of the religions or creeds. There shall be no violation of the right of religious communities to have their own schools provided they follow the general rules issued by the state regulating public instruction.”

\(^5\) The case of the Shiite community is remarkably exposed by Catherine Le Thomas (2012). The author demonstrates how education and school networks were at the heart of the strategies of empowerment of the religious and political actors emerging from the community. These strategies were made possible by the enhancement of the social conditions of the Shiite populations and their resulting growing willingness to pursue secondary and higher education.
territorial divisions, has constituted universities into strongholds for political or communal forces.

Space is the setting of the identification process. From the encounters it hosts, it provides a sense of identity. The Lebanese university landscape is characterized by its institutional, geographical, and political fragmentation. Entering in a faculty or a campus means to step into a specific local arrangement of relations. Perception and experience of this interactional setting stands pivotal in the formation and actualization of groups. The fragmentation of the Lebanese university territories, as well as the concomitant domination of partisan networks within the campuses, imprint the practices of the university life. Such a configuration leaves the political parties as the dominant providers for causes and the major directors of collective actions. This does not mean that political parties are the only form of social organizations existing among the students nor that substitute social cleavages are non-existent. However, if alternative groupings occasionally generate sporadic mobilizations, they appear unable to outweigh the partisan segmentation.

The primacy of the partisan frame in the allocation of signification in the university settings becomes the most obvious during the yearly student elections. These votes are organized to elect the student representative councils, whose forms differ between the American University of Beirut and the Saint-Joseph University. Student elections constitute the climax of political mobilization in the university worlds. They play an essential role in the affirmation and the legitimation of the position of the political organizations within university spaces and among the youth in general. They also represent a peak in the experience of student life, a symbol of its “liberty” compared to the closure of political activism imposed in most of the schools. In parallel with the relative emancipation

9 Agnès Favier draws this conclusion from her study of the student movement of December 1997 (Favier 2000). The same assumption arises from the observation of recent events, like the May 2010 strike against the rise of the tuition fees in AUB: the protest didn’t spread to other universities while rivalries between political groups inside AUB led to divisions about the strategy to adopt in front of the administration. More recently, the pro-secularization mobilization of the Spring 2011 underwent a slow but clear marginalization after noticeable initial successes, arguably due to both the internal divisions of the participants and the weight of the inter-partisan tensions in the political field.

7 In the AUB, the student elections were until 2012 held in two rounds. The first one referred to the election of faculty councils, Student Representative Committees (SRC), whose composition depends on the size of each faculty. The newly elected members of the SRC then voted in each faculty for representatives who will compose the University Student Faculty Committee (USFC). Since 2012, the students vote at the same time for SRC and USFC candidates (see L’Orient le Jour: November 12, 2012). The USFC is headed by the president of the AUB, but the Vice-president of the council who has a major role in the running of the student affairs is designated among student members. See: http://www.aub.edu.lb/sao/activities/org/usfc/Pages/index.aspx [April 2012]

8 In the USJ, the elections determine the composition of the various faculty councils, named “Amicales des étudiants”. Contrary to AUB, student representation is limited to the faculty level. The vote is held during the same day in all the different faculties and campuses that compose the USJ, on a single round proportional ballot. The president of each Amicale is chosen by the elected members. Student faculty councils’ statuses are available: http://www.usj.edu.lb/etudiants/amicales/111012stat.pdf [April 2012]

9 The expression was used by one of my interviewee, whose comment denoted a widely shared vision among the youth I encountered. Phil, interview with the author: October 20, 2008.

10 All the prominent political parties have established school committees in charge of spreading their cause among the youth. The majority of the schools is private and depends on specific codes. Although these schools are not free of political influences, public activism is in general banned: “The difference between school and university is first that university does not implement any limitation to political activities. There are some restrictions, but they are limited. (…) At school, the students are still too linked with their parents (…). The meetings were taking place outside the school, it was forbidden. (…) Students are more independent. And there are elections, which highlight our role with the youth” (Elias, AUB political activist, interview with the author: May 26, 2010). Yet, some political forces possess their own educational system, especially in the Shiite community in which the construction of communal schools were parallel
from parents’ control it induces, the arrival in the university connotes for the newcomers the reaching of a political maturity – at least the opportunity to concretely enter public politics. In that sense, student elections stand in a way as a rite of passage, all the more important since the Law impede political participation of the youth until the age of 21. The university arises thus as a space of in-between, marking the transition between political immaturity and the effective possibility to vote in local and parliamentary elections: “the interest of student politics in university is to acquaint the youth with politics, because before 21, it is not possible to vote but after graduation, we are precisely 21 years old”\(^\text{11}\). As a consequence, university elections also represent an occasion to publicly align oneself with a partisan group. They are a time when students position themselves or are being positioned in relations with political sympathies.

Starting from the close observation over several years of these mobilizations in two of Beirut’s main universities (the American University of Beirut and the Saint-Joseph University), this paper proposes to explore how such collective actions provide a concrete scene for constructing and expressing social identifications and boundaries. Observations were the complement of in-depth interviews realized between 2007 and 2011 among student partisan groups. At that time, the political scene was deeply polarized. Indeed, the 2005 Syrian withdrawal following the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri had generated a reshuffle of the political scene, leading to the emergence of two antagonist sides. On the one hand, the Future Movement of the Hariri family, in majority Sunni, the Druze PSP, the Christian Lebanese Forces and Kata'eb, known of the March 14 coalition in reference to the date of a massive demonstration demanding the Syrian departure, aligned with the American agenda in the region. Externally, they consequently strongly opposed the Syrian regime. Internally, they maintained the economic policies implemented during the 1990s and the early 2000s under the leadership of Rafiq Hariri and denounced the armed presence of Hezbollah, the powerful Shiite party, whose role in the resistance against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon allowed him to keep its military forces (it was the only armed-group officially not be dismantled after the end of the fighting in 1990). On the other hand, stood parties regionally allied with Syria, regrouped in the March 8 coalition, named after a demonstration in support of the national and regional role played by Damascus. This coalition was mainly composed of the Shiite movements Amal and Hezbollah and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement.

Interviews and observations mobilized here were mainly centered on this last party. The Free Patriotic Movement (al-Tayyâr al-Watanî al-Hurr), officially established as a political party in 2005, is rooted in one of the last episodes of the Lebanese wars: the experience of its leader, with the political empowerment (Le Thomas 2012), with the Amal Movement (Amal al-Tarbawiyya) and Hezbollah (School al-Mahdi as well as a complex network of non-profit organizations such as the associations al-Chadîd, al-Mustapha, al-Îmdâd, etc.).

\(^\text{11}\) Junior, interview with the author: October 28, 2008. The original statement was in French: “L’intérêt de la politique à l’université c’est d’habituer à la politique, parce qu’avant 21 ans, on ne peut pas voter et que quand on finit la fac, on a précisément 21 ans”. Besides, in a country in which political discussions inside the family or between friends are common scenes, either while watching the evening news or at gatherings, the passage from school to university seems to introduce a legitimate right to join the conversation and give one’s opinion. For example, in another of our discussion Junior and one of his friend, Omar, expressed this idea: Omar: “Je me rappelle de longs débats dans les soirées, (…) mais avant 15 ans, je ne comprenais rien. Seulement tu écoutes, tu essayes de te faire une opinion, mais personne ne t’écoute quand tu veux parler. [Junior: Exactement, j’ai le même vécu avant l’université] (…) C’est une question d’âge…les petits écoutent (…). [Junior: Tout le monde parle, sauf toi!] C’est ça! Tout le monde est passé par là.” Interview with the author: October 29, 2008 [in French].
General Michel Aoun, as a Prime minister between 1988 and 1990. At that time, the lack of agreement between factions resulted in a vacuum in the government, leading President Amine Gemayel to charge Michel Aoun, then chief of the Lebanese army, to head a military government. Facing many oppositions, inside as well as outside the country, Michel Aoun tried to impose himself by fighting the Syrian army and the Lebanese militias, especially the Christian Lebanese Forces (LF). Originally an umbrella organization of the Lebanese Front aiming at unifying the command of its various militias, the LF soon became the main Christian political actor and established its domination over the Christian populated areas of the country in which it constructed a state-like apparatus taking in charge public services, social and medical care by imposing taxation on the inhabitants. Aoun's political rhetoric claimed to “bring the state back in”, to face the corrupted and violent militia order. His posture gained him the support of an important part of the population, especially among Christians. Between 1989 and 1990, massive demonstrations rallied toward the Presidential palace situated in Baabda, near Beirut, in which the General had his headquarters. His popularity however did not prevent his political and military failure. After several months of resistance, Michel Aoun was finally evicted from power by a Syrian military operation in October 1990.

As the General was exiled in France, his followers progressively organized a clandestine civil movement to protest against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. FPM activists played an important role in the events of the spring 2005, when, within weeks of the assassination of the former Prime minister Rafiq Hariri, popular demonstrations and an intense international pressure caused the fall of the government sponsored by Damascus and the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon. A few days later, on May 7, 2005, Michel Aoun came back to Lebanon with the intention to organize politically his movement. However, the General's return was met with circumspection by the rest of the political class, frightened by his hard-line stances targeting the endemic corruption. In spite of its political isolation, the FPM was able to obtained a great electoral success in the Christian regions, winning 21 of the 128 seats at the occasion of the Parliamentary elections of the summer 2005. Following this success, the FPM officially became a political party on September 18, 2005. It recruits mainly within the Christian population although it officially campaigns for a secular vision of Lebanon.

Focusing on one group enables to enter more deeply into the group symbolic universe and therefore to reach a better understanding of identity processes and in-group and out-group boundaries displayed by the students. The general purpose being to analyze how cognitive boundaries operate in inter-group relations, a micro-sociological approach has been privileged in order to enable a description as detailed as possible of the observed processes of interactions. Representations can only be understood in their practical manifestations through an immersion into the studied field (Balandier 1967, p. VIII). Therefore, without underestimating the potential force of quantitative sociology, we clearly opted for a qualitative methodology focusing on “thick description” (Geertz 1973, p. 5-6, 9-10.). Inspired by the “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss 1967), fieldwork was started without well-structured hypothesis, while the observations progressively produced the frame of analysis. Then, the data – mainly collected in observations of the campus, participation in students’ meetings and discussions – were confronted with existing literature. The same method was used with the interviews as I chose to rely on students’ social-ties, practicing a kind of “snowball sampling” (ibid.) in order to highlight the networks that define the inter-personal relations among
USJ students. Such a micro-sociological work should not lead to excessive generalization as the situations observed were produced in a very specific context. However, it remains the best option in order to apprehend the materialization of identification processes and shed light on the practical impact of representation in everyday life relations (Martin 2002, p. 39-42.). As identities are in perpetual evolution, constantly built and reconstructed through social interactions, only the analysis of those concrete interactions can provide the grounding needed for the comprehension of such complex social processes (Cefaï 2001, p. 94-95). Consequently, the data presented here are empirical and largely original.

Drawing on this ethnographic experience and focusing on the identification processes, the objective of this paper is to discuss the impact of university elections in the elaboration of the split social system prevailing in the Lebanese university settings. What are the conditions that enable students to activate – even momentarily – a sense of belonging to one of the partisan groups competing for the appropriation of the space?

My hypothesis is that student elections work as positioning rituals i.e. as elements of maintenance of the divided social structure because they ensure year after year the reaffirmation of boundaries and the reproduction of distinctive partisan identity narratives within the campuses. Here, I refer to an extended conception of positioning, adapted from Harré’s theory (Harré 2004; Harré & Van Langenhove 1999). While his model focuses on conversational episodes, I use it as a conceptual backdrop to analyze more general interactional settings. As in Harré’s work, the notion of position is mobilized as an alternative to the one of role. Every interaction is characterized by a set of positions defined by the participants’ relations and available to them, creating a temporary and relational moral order in reference to which they are inclined to think, act and speak. This order is at the same time linked with specific storylines, narratives that the people positioned are in process of “living out” (Harré & Moghaddam 2003, p. 8). The university elections’ interactional setting encourages the allocation of reciprocal positions of students in terms of partisan identities. It may be described as a routinized form of interaction in which attachment to a political group is materially and symbolically highlighted.

Student ballots are symbolic because they serve as mediation for expressing a vision of political reality in which dominant parties claim to embody the various component of the divided social structure. In virtue of their repetitive nature (they are organized every year at the same period) and their dramatic dimension, they can be described as a political ritual. Drawing on the suggestion of David Kertzer, I use the concept of ritual as an analytical category, defined in a classical sociological perspective as normalized and recurring symbolic behavior (Kertzer 1988, p. 9). As Kertzer puts it, rites are used “to create political reality for the people (…). And through political ritual, we are given a way to understand what is going on in the world, for we live in a world that must be drastically simplified if it is to be understood at all.” (ibid., p. 1-2) According to him, rituals serve as devices through which “beliefs about the universe come to be acquired, reinforced, and eventually changed.” (ibid., p. 9) Political rituals such as student elections are thus used to symbolically affirm the deference to social perceptions of reality carried by dominant actors on the political scene – in the considered case, the political organizations.

Being political rituals, university elections are also concrete interactional rituals. Indeed, they involve the joint participation of multiple actors and precisely exist because of this conjunct
contribution. In that sense, and following Goffman’s invitation, student elections can be analyzed in the perspective of the “sociology of the circumstances”, which focuses on how a social system is built by the conjunction of persons and by the interactions it hosts (Goffman 1974, p. 8). Doing so, I intend to analyze the emergence and the diffusion of meaning as they are generated by the interplay between actors in the ritual of student elections. My aim is to concentrate on the grammars that unify and inform the actions of interacting people in a given social configuration. These grammars – understood as structure of signification – work as ordering devices to define, to distinguish, and to classify the social. They assign specific positions and behaviors, thus giving materiality to the productions of the imaginary (Balandier 1992, p. 41 and p. 48). In that perspective, rituals operate as dramatic demonstrations of the social structure. They articulate power and meaning as “dramatization determines the horizon of meaning in which power relations are embedded” (Abélès 1997, p. 270). The pursued goal is here to tackle the construction of these grammars from the bottom, starting from the temporally and territorially situated behaviors of the students.

Drawing on the fragmentation of the university spaces and the domination of the partisan networks, I intend to demonstrate how such a configuration frames the interactions during student elections and what the consequences are for the participants in terms of personal and social identity construction. Through a series of episodes concentrating on the issue of political competition between groups in AUB (1), the election campaign in USJ (2) mobilized to study the staging of collective identities during the electoral process in both universities, I argue that the time-and-space of student elections build and prescribe both collective and individual positioning in terms of partisan identification, thus fueling the processes of in-group integration and out-group distinction. By providing a concrete scene for expressing groupness (Brubaker & Cooper 2000), i.e. strong sense of belonging, and rivalries, the electoral moment exacerbates the latent ongoing competition between rival groupings for the definition of the social boundaries and the appropriation of the disputed territory of the university. As such, student elections emphasize the issue of relational positioning within the university space (and beyond), distributing the participants in a social map organized along partisan lines. They incarnate a time and space of production and activation of political identifications. In my view, they can be observed as a paradigmatic example of the ongoing construction and display of bonds, borders and identity narratives as they occur in various Lebanese interactional settings. They constitute one of the scenes in which partisan identifications are relationally built.

1. Episode one: Political competition and social boundaries in AUB election campaign

Focusing on the case of the 2010 AUB elections of the Student Representative Committee (SRC)\(^{14}\),

\(^{12}\) According to Georges Balandier, the use of the metaphor of the theater to describe the social world was inspired by the work of Nicolas Evreinov, whose theory gives theatrical basis for all the manifestations of the social life (Balandier 1992, p. 13). The sociology of Erving Goffman has made the most of this insight (Goffman 1991 [1974]; 1973 [1959]). In substituting the notion of position to the concept of role, I intend to give more flexibility to such a framework without refuting its strength in order to highlight its circumstantial nature.

\(^{13}\) I translated the original formulation from French: “la mise en représentation détermine l’horizon de signification où s’inscrivent les rapport des forces”.

\(^{14}\) This phase concentrates most the attention because all enrolled students can participate in the polls during the same day. The SRC members are elected in a single round majority vote. The second round consisting in the designation of
the configuration of time-and-space will be studied in regards to two sets of interactional flows. The first one refers to the relations between the university internal scene and the broader national socio-political arena, and especially parties’ competition. It is predominantly oriented from the outside toward the university’s space, essentially because of the domination of political organizations on the territory of the campus. It results that, even if the shift can be reversed on particular occasions, electoral interactions within AUB are framed by imported political praxis. Using Bourdieu’s concepts, it could be said that the students’ practices – the pattern of their actions – are shaped by their deprived position in the political field: they seem to reproduce cleavages and practices built on the conventional political scene. However, the situation is more complex if a second set of interactions is considered, defined by the interrelations between students inside the territory of the campus. As I intend to demonstrate, these two interactional processes are not necessarily congruent, which can lead to some disjunctions and conflicts, but are both participating together to the elaboration of the interactional setting in which the intergroup struggle for space is waged during the electoral moment (and beyond). My thesis is that these coexisting definitions of the situation play a central role in the production and the staging of (narratives about) collective/social identities based upon partisan labels.

A) Scene one: Order out of chaos

Friday, November 19, 2010. It’s still early in the morning. The stands typical of the student elections’ campaign in the American University of Beirut have been raised for a couple of days only. Around thirty small constructions are facing the West Hall in the upper campus. Most of them are still empty as the two previous days were off due to an Islamic holiday. Only a few activists are preparing the stands for the two-day electoral campaign that will be waged before the vote, scheduled the next Wednesday. Although the stands’ allocation is theoretically random, the distribution on the ground is based on the political division. The first fourteen stands are held by the “Students at Work” group, affiliated with the March 14 coalition. The next five are identified with the name “Alternative Front”. The last twelve appear more disordered. The wooden structures are covered with stapled posters representing a game of domino. They are entitled: “Order out of Chaos”. Although the slogan and drawings are the same in all the sheets, the colors differ. Some are orange and white, others yellow and black. For someone accustomed to the Lebanese political scene, it is clear that these signs respectively refer to the campaign of the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah, the two prominent forces in the opposition against the then ruling March 14 grouping on the national scale.

In the alleys of the campus, a dialectic between outside and inside, visible and invisible forces...
shaping the electoral configuration, seems at work. FPM students start to take off their orange and white placards again. They replace them with more elaborated violet posters without dominos but still entitled “Order out of Chaos”, excepting for one stand, labeled as “Order of the Engineers”. Meanwhile, other stands have been erected, facing the huts of the FPM. Some students are decorating them with blue signs: “Will we run this campaign?” and “WE WILL”. They are also hanging complete lists of candidates, distributed by faculties and years of study (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). Although no political signs are visible, it appears that their lists gather followers of the Socialist Party (PSP) and Harakât Amal.

“We have a problem with Amal” Darsi explained to me. “Because Hezbollah doesn’t want to fight Amal, we don’t know what is going to happen now. We are organizing meetings between the various opposition groups in AUB outside the university, in the offices of the political parties – Marwan represents the FPM there and he usually takes Elias, Michel or me with him.” The ongoing negotiations force the FPM students to conceal the names of their candidates, in the hope of an eventual agreement with Amal and the PSP. Michel H., president of the Freedom club, concurs. But he adds: “The problems are almost solved. We found a solution in the Faculty of Engineering, that’s why we already announced our lists there with a different campaign name. But the thing is the PSP tries to push us to the limit...they want us to publicize all our candidates to make the negotiations more difficult. If we can’t agree all together, then they will have more of their own members in the ticket with Harakât Amal.”

At that moment, Marwan, the coordinator of the FPM in AUB, arrives. He looks tired and confesses that he hasn’t slept a lot during the last nights. “Many problems are still to be solved. Everyone wants a bigger slice of the cake! We have announced that we will unveil the names of our candidates today. The other didn’t do so completely yet. Representatives of the Amal movement and Hezbollah in AUB have called me from 3 am last night. I didn’t sleep much. They wanted me to stop everything until we find an agreement, but I didn’t. It’s a game. It’s all about who is going to step back first. Hezbollah already tried a bluff a couple of days ago. They put the yellow domino posters up, to pressure Amal. They wanted to make them afraid of having to run on their own. Then, I myself displayed the orange dominos to say that we are also ready to go without any kind of alliances. Today, we replaced those orange signs with violet ones. It was planned from the beginning that our campaign will be violet, but we made the orange posters to increase the pressure. There will be many meetings today; I hope everything will be cleared before the weekend. I am coordinating the issue with the FPM student committee, but, unlike in all the other parties in which students are following the instructions given to them, we are the ones who actually decide what we are going to do and inform our party outside.”

It is now 2:30 in the afternoon, and the game of cat and mouse continues. The “We Will” group displays its determination by putting up a gigantic blue sign covering the front of their five stands. However, the bluff didn’t impress everyone. Luna, senior candidate for the FPM in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, is watching the scene: “We know they will end up being with us. For sure they will withdraw some of their candidates...they named candidates for almost every possible positions but it’s a political move, to pressure us.” Indeed, when I come back after the three-day weekend to the campus on Tuesday morning, on the eve of the elections, everything has changed. It’s only 8:30 am but FPM students are already finishing replacing all their posters again. There are now only three occupied stands with blue placards, all entitled “Order of the Engineers” and displaying the
names of the candidates for the sole Faculty of Engineering. The FPM lists in the other faculties have merged with the “We Will” campaign, which is now displaying slightly different posters integrating the candidates affiliated with the Aounist movement. Behind the “We Will” stands, the old Amal-PSP lists are now laying on the ground after having been shredded by the activists.

Commentary

Understanding the design of the “We Will” campaign necessitates zooming out of the university. Undeniably, it echoes directly the concomitant political imbroglio at the national level. After having embraced the “Beirut Spring” in 2005 and formed the political gathering of the March 14 along with mainly the Future Movement, the Lebanese Forces and the Kata’eb Party, Walid Joumblatt, leader of the PSP and Druze landlord, has progressively distanced himself from his allies since the summer 2009. He officially announced his withdrawal from the coalition in a press conference on the 2nd of August 2009. However, before he finally completed his volte-face by voting the no-confidence against Prime Minister Saad Hariri in January 2011, Joumblatt had chosen to keep a centrist position for several months without formally joining the opposition. In this context, the attitude of the Youth Progressive Organization, the student branch of the PSP has been subject to much speculation. In 2009, they maintained their alliance with the Future Movement in AUB whereas they supported the opposition groups in another university, the Lebanese-American University (LAU). Before the 2010 vote, it was rumored that the PSP students would run the campaign on their own or would even refrain from participating in the elections. In AUB during the campaign days, it became clear that the PSP is engaged with the Amal movement in a campaign that apparently excluded the FPM.

The reasons why Amal was likely to join the PSP rather than the FPM seem obvious: the two parties share a common ally, Hezbollah, but oppose each other on many aspects, most of all because Amal’s leader, the long standing head of the Parliament, is perceived as one of the main target of the FPM anti-corruption discourse. The tension between the two sides was publicly revealed during the 2009 parliamentary elections when the FPM challenged Amal’s hold on the mainly Christian city of Jezzine, in South Lebanon. Along the years, Nabih Berri, Amal's leader and longstanding president of the Parliament, had taken advantage of his prominent position within the State apparatus to establish patronage networks in the region of Jezzine where he was thus able to ensure the election of loyal Christian MPs. In 2009 however, despite their global alliance and mediations from Hezbollah, Amal and the FPM quarreled over the Jezzine’s case as Michel Aoun wanted to reinforce his position as a nationwide leader for the Christian Lebanese. It was finally decided that both parties will present their own list and on June the 7th, the FPM swept the all three contested parliamentary seats, causing Amal much discontent.

The entire act staged in AUB that year exposes a shadow theater whose scenario is written

17 The reasons behind his withdrawal are multiple. For many analysts, they are rooted in the May 7 events in 2008. At that time, the PSP headed by Walid Joumblatt was considered a pillar of the March 14 government. Joumblatt was instrumental in the decisions of the cabinet to pressure Hezbollah by removing its land-line communication network and replacing the head of the airport security, known for his ties with the Shiite party. However, after the outbreak of armed clashes triggered by the government’s move, Joumblatt witnessed the collapse of his ally of the Future Movement in Beirut within a couple of days, leaving the PSP alone to confront Hezbollah’s fighters. Although he didn’t break away from the March 14 coalition until the summer 2009, the 2008 episode certainly played a role in Joumblatt’s perception of a necessary accommodation with Hezbollah to protect his own group, which led to the change of his strategic positioning.
elsewhere and actions are set up in the backstage. Everything that matters gives the impression to occur outside the front scene, under the auspices of the partisan forces, negotiating between each other. The deal was clinched on Sunday night, apparently thanks to the willingness of Hezbollah to reach an agreement. The Shiite party is said to have removed most of his own candidates in order to enable the fusion between the two lists. In such a game, the students appear as the proxies of their respective groups. In spite of his affirmation, Marwan, the FPM coordinator in AUB, apparently lacks the power to compose his own partition centered on AUB’s internal space. As such, the problem opposing his group to Amal is not new. Six months earlier, he already shared with me his discontent regarding their alliance:

“I went once to General Michel Aoun, a month and a half ago. I told him that I believe one of our allies is not working with us in AUB. I really don't want to be allied with them next year for the elections in AUB (...). To my surprise, he told me: 'Do whatever you thing is right. If you believe they are not good allies, don't go with them'. (...) I told him: 'They are doing wrong, I can't tolerate that!' (...) First, they worked on improving the sectarian divisions. Second, and more importantly, they are not honest with us. (...) When we go in the elections they are not giving all their votes to our candidates. They are giving all their votes for their candidates but not all their vote to ours. They are working wrong. The manner they speak is not decent. At the end, I couldn't tolerate this. The ones before me, they tolerated this because they didn't want to lose the elections. I don't care if I win or if I lose. Honestly, I don't care.”

However the alliance remained. Whether it was to secure a victory in AUB elections or to avoid a crisis between political partners in a tensed national configuration, the maintenance of the electoral coalition illustrates the importance of university polls in the eyes of partisan forces. This significance is first material. Elections offer the occasion to control faculty councils and thus to secure the funds allocated to them in order to finance partisan activities and promote the presence of the group in the university territories. Second, the symbolic dimension emerges as central. Claiming the victory in the student polls organized in an eminent institution such as AUB helps enhancing the public image of a political movement, especially in a context of intense partisan competition. All national medias report the results of the voting held in the country’s most prominent universities and the results are analyzed year after year in the light of the struggles structuring the political field. Finally, on the internal scene, triumph in the electoral process highlights the presence of the group and constructs it as a figure of identification for the students. Undoubtedly, success generates a sentiment of domination that fosters a sense of security in the divided social environment of the campus, encouraging those among the students who feel attached to a party to engage. A member of the Amal youth movement in the Lebanese-American University (LAU) I met during my Master studies presented this idea quite clearly: “I thought that I need to belong to a group in order to exist here, because you don’t know anyone when you arrive in the university...it was at first social, then you feel implicated in politics (...). There are so many different groups that you have to belong to one of them. (...) To see that we are a strong group here encouraged me.”

Demonstrating its implantation thus may enable a party to produce political vocations among

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18 Marwan, interview with the author: May 26, 2010 [in English].

19 Hamad, interview with the author: March 3, 2006 [in English].
students. In that sense, the inter-party competition and the social process of identification among students work hand in hand. Elections constitute the archetypical time in which partisan boundaries become immediately visible, fueling the dynamics of recognition and distinction. Highlighting the presence of political groups, student ballots produce through the interactions between participants a classification of the social based on partisan identification. To the material interests of the political forces, the electoral process adds a symbolic dimension sustaining their role as identification frames. Consequently, the students’ allegiance to partisan directives essentially impacts their mobilizations and thus the social categories these practices sketch.

The description of this first scene aimed at demonstrating the influence of political groups on student mobilizations during the electoral process. Because collective identification is produced in action (Mathieu 2001, p. 18), the capacity of partisan forces to compose from the back scene the progress of the play enacted by the students necessarily enables the diffusion of categories organizing the social structure as it is perceived in the AUB setting. The order that shapes the apparent chaos of interactions between students is built around partisan labels and storylines. However, this goes far beyond the immediate political competition as such and rather echoes a more global vision of the social reality as fragmented between groups as it is possible to infer from the next scene.

**B) Scene two: “I am taking a stand”**

Tuesday, November 23, 2010. The last day of the electoral campaign. The situation remained however surprisingly quiet. Only a dozen of activists were already present when I entered the campus in the morning. Although FPM has joined the “We Will” campaign, it was in front of the stand of an independent candidate, a Senior Staff Writer of *Outlook*, that I found Luna, nonchalantly reading her Biology handbook. She smiled at me and said: “As I told you on Friday, the two sides have merged! But I am not happy with it”, she added. “I don’t want people to see me with them, so I sit here”. As I asked her why, she answers: “I don’t like blue!”

“No seriously, what is the problem?
- The “We Will” campaign is the problem!
- It’s about politics or is it something else?
- It’s not about politics, it’s social!
- What do you mean?
- I don’t like these people. (...) Some were my friends but I realized that they are not honest. (...) They don’t like each other, and they don’t like us, but only because of politics they are together. So it’s just the opposite of what you say: in politics, we are together, but the problem is social, with the people. (...) Moreover, I don’t trust them, we don’t know how they are going to vote for the USFC [in the second round of the elections].”

A few meters away, Abdo, another FPM activist in the university, was setting up his own stand. He installed a big orange poster displaying his name and the position for which he was running, a senior (third year) seat in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. “I am taking a stand, literally” he told me with a humoristic tone. “This alliance is purely for electoral purposes. I was against it. The majority of our group didn’t share my views. Democracy in the FPM kicked me out!” he explained, stating that it was important for him to expose his views and that he hoped to attract many votes
from FPM supporters who would prefer to support him rather than the candidates of the unified list. From that moment, Abdo started a campaign on his own, walking around the alleys surrounding West Hall to engage conversation with students and try to convince them to vote for him, most of the time accompanied by his girlfriend. Wearing trendy clothes, he also displayed ostentatiously a Christ pendant around his neck.

Commentary

Key themes emerged from that short early morning scene. Luna's comment about the social dimension of her rejection played a central part in the construction of my understanding of the situation. A blatant conflict emerges between the two flows of interactions shaping the electoral process in AUB. The decision taken by the political forces of the “national opposition”20 to unify their parties in a front against the March 14 campaign, “Students at Work”, is criticized by FPM students. Some of the discontents come from the eviction of one candidate implied by the merge of the Aounist and the “We Will” lists21. However, the posture taken by Luna and Abdo signals a more profound rejection. As Luna did that day, Abdo explained his refusal of the alliance by pointing out the disaffection between FPM supporters on the one hand and Amal or PSP followers on the other:

“We don't even like each other! On the other side, the Lebanese Forces and Future Movement are really allied and never fight or at least they did it inside, they don't let their fights being decided by other parties. They have common views, right or wrong, but they have common views. Their alliance is based on common ground. (...) We don't have common ground in our alliances. That was my point. That was why I ran as independent during elections. (...) But they didn't want to lose. I said that losing is not a problem if you prove your point and prove to your people that you are still on the same views we started with. I tried to show this, but it's hard to convince someone to lose.”22

Both Luna and Abdo condemned the electoral nature of the agreement by emphasizing the distinction that exists on the campus between the students attached to the different groups. In that sense, they reveal a conflict opposing the interactions of partisan forces on the national scale and the student interactions at the micro level of everyday life in their campus. In their views, electoral groupings that participate in the elections are constructed as embodiments of segments of the social structure. It seems that in a configuration in which the boundaries are eclipsed by the electoral agreement, Luna and Abdo insisted on the social differentiation in order to maintain the delimitation. They refused to be positioned on the basis of an electoral coalition that does not represent for them an accurate image of the social system existing on the campus and, beyond, in the country. The system they perceive divides the Lebanese society – hence the student population – in sub-groups understood as embodiments of partisan labels articulated to confessional

20 The gathering of Hezbollah, Amal, and FPM, alongside smaller movements (mainly the Marada of Northern Lebanon landlord Sleiman Franjieh, the Armenian party of Tachnag, and the SSNP) against the then governing coalition of March 14. The opposition was generally referred to as “March 8 coalition”, however, the FPM as a political force participated in the demonstration held on March 14, 2005, and not in the one of March 8.

21 A few minutes after my conversations with Luna and Abdo, agitation arose in front of the “Order of the Engineers” stands. One student, with the help of his friends, wrote his name with a pen on the poster displaying the FPM candidates in the faculty of Engineering. The rest of the group rapidly intervened and the tag was concealed by a sheep of white paper stapled on the placard.

22 Abdo, interview with the author: November 30, 2010 [In English].
backgrounds. These sub-groups are defined as much by their own characteristics as by their relations. In the narrative FPM members mobilize, their sub-group is considered “Christian” in its background but favorable to coexistence – which distinguishes it from the LF, Christian but advocating separate development of communities. Although the content of the definition of attributes varies according to the dominant identity narratives in each sub-group, all globally agree on the boundaries between them. FPM as well as LF members acknowledge the same symbolic borders. Yet, they don't give them the same meaning. The social system is thus constructed upon the *habitualization* of fragmentation and concurrent narratives related to it. A position in interactional setting relies on a storyline, a narrative that justifies it and which are usually taken for granted by the participants (Davies & Harré 1990). Here however, the storyline “electoral alliance” seems not enough to support a position associated with what is perceived as alien social components. The actors refuse to endorse in the course of interaction an identity label that does not reflect their perception of their self.

Luna’s remark about politics also highlighted a specific definition of what is political. In my question, I was not referring to the alliances organizing the party system but rather to the political stance of the FPM. In my mind, their position on corruption for instance may have given ground to reluctance concerning the partnership with the Amal Movement, an opinion that regularly arose in my interviews. However, in her response, her conception of politics was limited to inter-partisan coalition in the public political scene. By contrast, her re-qualification of the difference as social illustrates the domination of identification processes – based on an exclusivist definition of the group – over politics – the necessary cohabitation and negotiation with the other (Seurat 1985, p. 79). If the political struggle waged by the partisan forces on the campus’ territory is, after all, the phenomenon that predominantly shapes the outcome of the electoral process, its main effect remains that it activates perceptions of the social world relying on irreducible boundaries. In the eyes of students like Luna, the elections serve less the affirmation of a political domination, without even mentioning the defense of the students’ rights, than the symbolic proclamation of exclusive identities. As Michel Seurat himself noted, identity, as proclaimed by Luna, stand primarily as a tool to define a relation to the others in a contextualized interactional setting (ibid., p. 80). Politically, some of the partisan groups may have common interests, but they nonetheless remain distinct. So Luna expressed the idea that they gather around the FPM group in AUB because she recognizes herself in the collectiveness it incarnates in contrast with the others.

The rejection seemed even stronger in the case of Abdo. Not only he refused to join the “*We Will*” electoral list, but he engaged in the battle as an independent. At first sight, his decision may have appeared as a tactical move from the FPM group: as every student can designate as many competitors as there are seats to conquer independently of the lists established by the student coalitions, the movement, by presenting one of its members outside the official candidates of the opposition coalition, offered the opportunity for his constituency to remove one of the Amal-PSP contenders and select Abdo instead. In doing so, they may ensure that the FPM gets at the end more nominees than its allies considering that most of people vote for pre-arranged unified lists.²³

²³ Actually, both the FPM on the one hand and the ticket Amal-PSP on the other apparently used the strategy of splitting electoral lists in order to overcome its rival within the opposition and to ensure its domination in the second round of the elections, the USFC vote. At the end of the 2010 elections, Amal succeeded in gaining the largest number of delegates in both the SRC and the USFC, thus ensuring the election of one of its member as Vice-President of the USFC.
However, it was not the case. His rejection of the alliance with Amal and the PSP led him to openly reconsider his link with the FPM:

“Some still like Michel Aoun but some are disappointed about the outcomes. (...) Some disagree with Michel Aoun’s and FPM’s current politics, their alliances and views. (...) Mainly it’s the alliance with people who don’t share his political views. Some alliances now are completely unexplainable...the people don't share the same idea. I mean with Hezbollah and Harakat Amal and now with the PSP. I think that each one has its own ideas, its own goals for Lebanon. And alliances are just based in numbers, not based on common views. (...) August 7 [2001] was when FPM was really on its views and fighting with nothing for what it believed was right. (...) I still believe in those views and I think that current decisions are not based on these common views. After 2006, FPM started to drift away from this base, they are not the same. (...) I am very nostalgic of this time, and of 2005: I think it was the only election when FPM went through really believing on its principles. (...) I tried here in the university [to bring the spirit back] in demanding that FPM runs as independent, but FPM members, who are maybe very intelligent, didn't want to...they also seek their own interests and preferred to win with any alliances than to lose, even if it would have brought the old spirit back. And they have the wrong beliefs that FPM members will remain FPM members whatever the alliances. (...) It's not based any more on young people thinking of what is right and what is wrong. (...) That is why I am not such an active member of the FPM. Many members are like me, at least here. (...) I still think that many MPs and ministers from the FPM are working for the good of the country but I think the only problem with FPM is their alliances: it's not based on any common ground.”

Abdo's example illustrates *a contrario* how participation in student elections can be seen as the translation of one's identification with the group. To be attached to the FPM is at first demonstrating this link in collective interaction by taking the position of a follower. When the “We Will” list failed representing an image of the group Abdo had constructed, it led him to reconsider his involvement. He refused to continue to publicly endorse a positioning as FPM member. His withdrawal allows understand how student elections offer the scene to express publicly identification with a group, first of all because they ensure year after year the reaffirmation of partisan identity within the campus. Staging his own distance with the FPM let also Abdo openly affirm the limit of the identification he experienced with the group at that moment. His words indicate that, if he was still inserted within the social network of the movement, his sense of belonging to a collective project declined, precisely because he thought FPM had lost his identity in the path it chose. Moreover, the idea of lost identity refers to the own interpretation of Abdo, examining what he considered as the heart of the group. To say that the movement changed, that it didn't follow its initial views suggests an introspective analysis inclining him to think that the FPM does not correspond to the image he formed of it and therefore cannot support his sense of self anymore: “I don't know [if I still consider myself as “FPM”]. I don’t know, really...I still believe in the initial views, but I don't know if I am still an FPM member”.

The focalization of Abdo’s critics on alliances evokes a closed definition of the group. During our

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24 Abdo, interview with the author: November 30, 2010 [In English].

25 Ibid.
In his first meeting he insisted that:

“In Brazil, no one cares about other people's religion. So when I came here I didn't even know my religion! I didn't know my religion before I came to Lebanon and talk with people asking about religions. I learned that there are different religions. Outside, all the Lebanese people are the same: all our friends are from all the religions and all of them have almost the same views about the country. But when they come to Lebanon, they differentiate between religion and political views. (...) The division here is really based on religions. When I first came, I rarely went to West-Beirut and actually, I think I never came until I was 15 or 16. We lived in East-Beirut and we never crossed the 'border', it is like a border, and when you go from one region to another, you don't feel that outside Lebanon that you have regions for religions. Here, people look at you based on your religion. They don’t look at you as a person. That was a little bit strange when I came. Then I got used to it, like everyone.”

The Lebanese structure therefore underlines in his perception religious belonging and inter-group differentiation. Lebanon is a society made of boundaries. Although he stated in the same interview that “Lebanon as I wish would be when religions are apart from politics”, he also voiced many opinions shaped by this perception of division between sects. His nostalgia of the pre-2005 era is also the regret of a lost unity among Christians, which he attributed to the struggle for leadership between Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea. So his reminiscence of the past ideals of the Party is at least partially related with the deception caused by division between Christians. Interestingly, his original environment, the Lebanese emigrants’ community in Brazil, is described with the same image of unity. Abdo seems at the same time to regret and reproduce sectarian fragmentations. In that sense, the FPM alliances with Muslim groups such as Amal, Hezbollah, and more recently PSP, came in a way in contradiction with this construction of reality Abdo operated in the Lebanese context. However when we met in May, although he noted that Amal didn’t represent a reliable partner in AUB and expressed doubts about the alliance with Hezbollah because of the May 7 events, he didn’t question his own affiliation with the FPM.

Two hypotheses may help understand how student elections led him to reconsider his position. First, it might be because 2010 elections in AUB saw for the first time PSP students join the coalition. In May, he explained that his father, originated from the Aley region, had been caught into the war of the Mountain, opposing the Lebanese Forces and the PSP in 1983-1984: “My father was living in a region that was evacuated. The Lebanese Forces took him with them to Deir al-Qamar. He was with 150 men from the LF and was the only one that was not engaged. They were not from the region but come to fight the PSP and the Syrians. So he had to lead them to Deir al-Qamar”.

Second, and, in my opinion, more convincingly, the university elections forced him to take a position in his everyday interaction. To use Luna’s words, until then, the FPM’s alliances were a “political” choice but became “social” when it was necessary for him to position himself in the interactional flow on

26 Abdo, interview with the author: May 25, 2010 [in English].

27 He explained: “Before 2005, when Michel Aoun was in France and Samir Geagea still in jail, Christians were still together. They liked each other, they had common views: they wanted Syria out, they wanted independence, and young people forgot about what happened [during the war]”. Abdo, interview with the author: November 30, 2010 [in English].

28 Abdo, interview with the author: May 25, 2010 [in English].
the campus. The allocated position proposed to him implied the concrete endorsement of these alliances, the affirmation of a common belonging uniting the groups of the opposition. Abdo rejected it, reiterating several times that “there is no common ground in these alliances”. From a causality point of view, it is difficult to say whether it was his rejection of the electoral gathering that triggered his detachment. However, the rhetoric of the betrayal of the FPM ideals as well as the constant reference to the Party’s allies clearly indicates that since this episode, he had not been able to fully recognize himself in the movement any more.

His evolution thus demonstrates how elections concretely establish positions in the interactions unfolding in the university setting and how they are intrinsically connected to the sense of belonging of the students. It also acknowledges the importance of concrete circumstances experienced by the actor in the birth, evolution, and transformation of their identifications. The social link building the group is not immutable but rather an evolving process negotiated in the flow of experience. Starting from Luna’s and Abdo’s reluctance to approve an electoral alliance, it was demonstrated that elections are perceived as an event allocating meaning to students’ relative location in the university territory. The competing groups are considered as incarnation of social sub-cultures. Consequently, elections enable the interpretation – i.e. the embodiment – of the character of the partisan follower, envisaged as constitutive of the self. As such, they constitute a positioning context that plays an important role in the materialization of the processes of identification experienced by the students. The electoral moment thus clearly highlights the issue of positioning in the university setting. But positioning oneself as a group member is not invariable: as an interactional process, it is negotiated. Luna used the dialectic between political alliance and social belonging to mark her distance without refuting her place as a follower of the FPM. She afterward participated in the polls along her comrades. Abdo on the contrary mobilized the rhetoric of original purity and change to construct his distance with the group. In both cases, the time and scene of the electoral process was the occasion to elaborate and display their sense of belonging in reference to partisan identity.

Although the scene reveals some disjunctions and conflicts between the inter-partisan and the intra-student levels, both are participating together to the elaboration of the interactional setting in which social identities based upon partisan labels are produced and staged. Despite the agreement to unify the opposition lists, every party tried to override its allies. Identity claims and the struggle for appropriation of the university space therefore proved stronger than the politics of coalition observed at the national level. But once again, this phenomenon seems to reflect a more structural tendency existing in the political system. As is the case in the Lebanese scene, the parties inside AUB endorsed the status of social segment representatives, negotiating between each other for a share of power. As observed in scene one, beyond the facade concord, all parties tried to secured a “bigger slice of the cake”, to paraphrase Marwan, the FPM coordinator in AUB. This attitude fueled social distinction – parallel to representations of the students. The system in which student mobilizations occur remains therefore determined by a grammar dividing the social between groups in opposition to one another.

C) Scene three: Students at work

29 After the elections of the 2010 USFC, both members of the Amal-PSP coalition and of the FPM tried to ally with representatives of March 14 to ensure the election of one of their members as Vice-President. A student from the Amal Movement was finally elected.
Tuesday, November 23, 2010. D-Day. The first students arrived on the campus around 8, walking through the impressive deployment of security forces. While groups of soldiers from the Lebanese army and Internal Security Forces guards were stationed in Bliss Street, protecting AUB main gate, inside, employees of the university double checked the identity of any trespasser. Only students who had paid their tuition fees for the coming semester could enter the campus. For outsiders, it was necessary to benefit from an authorization granted by the administration. Your name was then put on the list of the “Captain”, the head of the AUB security.

The early comers were activists. They gathered in strategic places, in front of the future voting points to arrange their final strategy around a quick breakfast. The cluster supporting the March 14 coalition presented a group strong of around twenty students wearing yellow construction vests. They brought key-rings, scarves, stickers, and T-shirts of the same color. These initial moments confirmed that the match would be decided between three main groups: “Students at Work” (March 14), “Alternative Front” (secular and leftist AUB clubs), and “We Will”. If the different components of this last coalition coordinated together, each party nevertheless worked mainly on its own. In front of a cell only made of FPM followers, around ten persons, Marwan organized a small briefing. After reminding the main tasks assigned to each of them, he gave the cell-phone provided by the Party to one of his subordinates. It would be one of the rare appearances of the FPM leader in AUB during that day, another indication that what matters was handled in private, in some back-scene setting.

The student masses showed one hour later. From that moment, the arrangements organized by the groups became clear. Two main spots of activities emerged: West hall in the higher campus and the surrounding of the Engineering faculty in the lower part of the university. These two sites being related to the two most populated faculties: Arts and Sciences (FAS) and Engineering and Architecture (FEA). In front of these spots, some students questioned every person they came across to inquire about his or her faculty, discipline, and voting intentions, while others were in charge of distributing the programs and lists of candidates to the crowd. The formers widely differ in forms: “Students at Work” platform looked like small magazines, made of fine paper and incorporating photos of each of their candidates, whereas the “Alternative Front” uses simple black and white paper sheets. The “We Will” campaign didn’t even distributed programs, even if some were sent by emails directly to the students, at least in the faculty of Engineering. The contents of the electoral platforms were scarce, limited to general propositions to enhance the student’s conditions (opening of studying spaces, change of the credit system, improvement of the cafeteria, development of financial aids, etc.) and, in the case of the “Alternative Front”, broad political messages (secularism, boycott of Israel, freedom of expression, etc.). No mention of partisan positioning was present. The lists of candidates distributed were small and each sheet completely filled by the names of the candidates. Besides electoral material, the groups circulated stickers or cell-phone covers for the students.

Activists were continuously talking on the phone, holding lists of names. These lists indicated the surnames, first names, partisan preference, and reference (the activist in charge of contacting him/her) of each enrolled student for a given faculty. Some team leaders were regularly reported the latest progresses. When the electoral operations really started, at 10 am, another display emerged. The supporters of the various lists gathered along the barriers that guided the path to the voting rooms. Every time a student reached that point, he or she was met by this crowd inquiring about his
or her name and reminding about the rules to follow: “*Just circle the number of the candidates on the ballot papers, not their names!*” Suddenly, in the routine of the discussions between activists and passing students, an undergraduate answered that he didn’t vote yet. Immediately, one, then two and three supporters of the “Alternative Front” encircled him and designated a girl among them to guide him to the polls. During the day, many students were thus escorted to the path with much insistence, surrounded by supporters of one or several groups, each one trying to be the last to speak to him or her and to put the chosen list in his or her hand. After five hours on intense activity, the pace slowed and the campus was left progressively emptied of its population. The alleys leading from the main entrance to West Hall seemed strangely quiet after the overflow of movement they witnessed earlier. Around 4 o’clock, the activists would finally go to the voting rooms themselves and, once all of them would have cast their votes, they would throw their lists in the air, in a din of applause and shouts.

Sounds and visuals were indeed important components of the scene displayed in the setting of the campus. From the morning, the outburst of multiple tints struck the eye. Rival groups wore distinctive clothing of the theme color they chose for their campaign. These colors have no specific meaning and change every year. They are not symbolic but distinctive. However, activists often wear accessories displaying the colors associated with their political groups: orange for the FPM, green for Amal, blue for the Future Movement. Students also customized their clothes with stickers, scarves, badges and all sort of gadgets. The physical space of the campus was itself turned into a contest of colors, especially in the areas designated for the display of placards. Usually filled with information about student activities or university’s life, they became during the campaign and even more during the day of elections a battle field. At regular interval, each side intended to cover all the posters of its rivals, changing the shade of the landscape. Beyond the willingness to distinguish between the competing lists, the clothes of the activities also aimed at marking their partisan identities. Noticeably, in the early hours of the electoral agitation, students from Hezbollah were distributing their recognizable black scarves to their supporters. Taking them from a gigantic plastic bag, two activists were providing their comrades with this highly identifiable symbol. Many of the FPM students, in addition to the blue t-shirts of the “We Will” campaign and the orange accessories reminding of their political stands, also paraded with a dark *keffiyeh* of their ally.

With the campus waving like a beehive, the space was saturated with sounds. However, it rarely took the form of vocal contest between competitors. Except for the final moments in which activists of a given side went to vote in turn, the rivals did not engage in openly demonstrative voicing. The sound that emerged was more related to the ongoing flow of activity: people calling each other, shouting instructions, or inquiring about students’ participation. During the previous days, vocal battles were also extremely rare. Only once did the rival groups of “We Will” and “Students at Work” confront each other with songs and slogans, and it was related to the presence of journalists from a TV channel. It seemed during the all week that the competition for the appropriation of the space was limited to the disclosure of the results and its aftermath celebrations.

**Commentary**

The practices of the student activists on the occasion of elections constitute a ritualized know-how. The three main groups in competition use the same techniques that a reproduced years after years. When I first discovered AUB polls during the year of my exchange studies in 2002, the political
context as well as the alliances completely differed but the behaviors displayed the very same characteristics. The routinized nature of these performances grants them the normalized and recurring dimension of rituals (Kertzer 1988, p. 9).

The origins of such practices are multiple. However, they seem largely inspired by the functioning of the partisan electoral machine at the national level: the control exercised on the lists of voters, the calls and personal encouragement to participate to the polls, the continuous verification of who has effectively voted, are all found during elections held in the country, either parliamentary or local. Even the form of the electoral lists is similar to the ones used in voting operations outside the university. However, if those small sheets of paper filled with the candidates’ names without any remaining space aim at avoiding split-ticket voting by providing ready to use lists with no possibility for the voters to erase one name and replace it by another, they are useless in the context of the university where the ballots are printed by the administration and only require from the students to circle the number of the candidate they chose.

The importation of partisan practices and habits may come from the intervention of the parties' organizations and human networks in the voting process. The engagement of partisan forces is manifested primarily by the presence of their electoral machine. The mobilization of the electoral machine of the parties in the university is a mobilization of resources. Human resources first, as a vast number of students take part every year in the electoral campaign. The groups in competition need the support of many in order to maximize the impact of their pre-election work: identify the students and make sure they vote. These flocks of people who gather in front of the ballot rooms, who call their fellow students to convince them to show up, who relay the information to the team leaders, who ask everyone passing by if he or she voted, are recruited beyond the nucleus of politically active students on the campus. Being the climax of partisan mobilization, the campaign stimulates participation further than any other activity organized by partisan groups during the year. Additionally, the material resources employed are considerable. According to the March 14 representative, the 2010 campaign cost 10,000 dollars. Rumors circulating among students evoked the double. Political parties provided the money needed to buy all the accessories, but also to pay cellphone bills, or even transportation for students who were unable to reach the university on the day of the elections. If the amount of money injected into university politics has been criticized inside as well as outside the arena of the campus, students interestingly never complained about alleged vote buying. The condemnations I collected during my years of fieldwork remained limited to stories about the distribution of prepaid cellphone cards.

Despite the massive intervention of political movements, outside politics is not the only element to take into account to understand the electoral practices. The continuous inter-generational transmission of knowledge between the successive flows of students has also generated the habituation of the techniques activists deploy during the decisive day. In that sense, the university elections play a central role in the political training of the young partisans. Students who engage in these electoral activities learn the rules of the game from their more experienced fellows. This transmission of knowledge is moreover pivotal in the construction of the electoral moment as one of the highlight of the university life. To acquire the skill to run student elections and actively

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30 In 2008, Michel Aoun, leader of the FPM, condemned in an interview to the al-Manar channel the money paid by the March 14 coalition to finance student elections: “Aoun afraid political money reaches universities!”, Al-Manar website: November 8, 2008.
participate in the event represent one of the discoveries made during the stay at AUB. Even for the students who are not necessarily engaged in politics, it is difficult to ignore the event as well as the inter-student socialization it implies. For the sake of the campaign, the participants have to meet with scores of new comrades and exchange with them. Within each group, the numerous pre-electoral meetings as well as the action during the final day construct strong bonds. This may explain the high participation rate recorded every year, far beyond the number of politically active students. The number of followers active in the electoral machines of the party during the event is also far more important than the nucleus of young people who animate the FPM group during the year.

A key moment in the social system of AUB, the day of elections moreover produce a political reality. It works as the reminder of the domination of partisan movements on the public arena. In spite of their strong implantation in the university, political movements remain relatively discreet in the everyday life of the campus. During the electoral process in contrast, the domination of these groups openly resurfaces. Thus, student elections maintain the perceptions that the social structure in AUB setting rests above all on partisan identities. Through their objective domination made possible thanks to their strong implantation and the mobilization of their resources, the parties impose the subjective definition of reality as fragmented between political groups. Symbolically, elections reaffirm the prevalence of an interpretation of lived space as a field structured by partisan competition. The use of distinctive clothing for instance, as the case of the scarves worn by Hezbollah supporters demonstrates, serves as representation of the identities embodied by the political groups. These black kūfiyât symbolize the fighters of the Islamic resistance who usually wear them, but are also primarily related to the Shiite symbolism as they most of all appear during the period of ‘Āshūrā’, their black color referring to the mourning of Imâm Husayn martyred in Karbala in the year 680\(^{31}\). Such markers therefore support identity narratives about the partisan groups, positioning them in relation to one another in terms of present political stands (the resistance against those who campaign for the disarmament of Hezbollah) and sectarian backgrounds (Shia against Sunni Muslims), illustrating once more the imbrication between partisan and religious references. These relational claims about identity about the competitors are publicly reasserted at the occasion of student elections and highlighted in the interplay between actors.

Political competition between partisan forces and the process of distinction between students both exacerbated during the electoral procedure thus construct the university territory of AUB as a fragmented space. In this divided setting everyone is potentially positioned in reference to labels perceived as incarnation of coexisting idiosyncratic social groups. Joint participation of distinctive groupings seem to give these gatherings all their meaning through the affirmation of their boundaries. It underlines the circumstantial and relational nature of identification processes as the case of University Saint-Joseph also illustrates.

\(^{31}\)‘Āshūrā’ literally refers to the tenth (‘āshūrā means the tenth day) of the Islamic month of Muharram remembered as the day of the death of Husayn, son of the Imâm Ali and grand-son of the Prophet Mohammad, massacred along with members of his family in the battle of Karbala. The killing was ordained by Yazid, caliph of the Ummayad, upon the conflict opposing the Shiites, partisans of the Ahl al-Bayt (People of the House – referring to the family of the Prophet), and the Sunnis rejecting the exclusive legitimacy of the family of the Prophet. According to the story, Husayn was killed after ten days of a heroic resistance. The commemoration thus lasts for these ten days, each one corresponding to one specific episode, the climax being reached on the day of ‘āshūrā. ʿAshūrā represents the founding myth of Shia Muslims.
2. Episode two: a rite of institution? Electoral meetings among USJ students

The situation in the Saint-Joseph University notably differs from the AUB case because of the Christian social, spatial and political environment. The electoral competition is deeply marked by the rivalry between the FPM and the Lebanese Forces, even if other partisan actors play a role in the contest. Starting from the elections of the year 2008, the impact of the duel is explored in reference to its social function, using the concept of rite of institution proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. According to him, these rituals consecrate the social significance of specific boundaries (1991 [1982], p. 117). My hypothesis is that the routinized and symbolic activities organized by the group during student elections intend to institute and legitimize its difference regarding to the outsiders. They participate to the affirmation of a separating line defined in reference to identity narratives that create an “arbitrary boundary” (ibid., p. 118) and can thus, in spite of some limitations, be analyzed in a discussion of Bourdieu’s insight about the power of rituals to assign properties of social nature and consequently build “real” social oppositions. Student group behaviors aim at “sanctioning and sanctifying a difference (…) by making it known and recognized (…)” (ibid., p. 119).

A) Scene one: “ma’nâ”, “dednâ”

Tuesday, October 21, 2008. Antoine called me around 8 pm to inform me that the USJ students in the faculty of Economics would held their first pre-electoral meeting that night, in the Queen’s Plaza building, the location of the former FPM headquarters in Jdeydeh, in the northern suburb of Beirut. As I arrived in the second floor office, the organization of the work was immediately visible: three tables were scattered in the vast room, each gathering around a dozen of activists, males in majority, distributed by year of studies. They were all busy scrutinizing lists of enrolled students, copied from the administration of the university or even photographed and then printed. The ambiance seemed studious yet relaxed. The activity was simple: one member was reading the names and, afterwards the others answered: “ma’nâ” [“with us”], “dednâ” [“against us”], or “neutre” [systematically said in French]. The operation was repeated several times during the night, classifying the population of the faculty into those three categories. Students call this a “pointage” [also always in French]. “We count approximately and the next day we try to have a feedback on that. Tomorrow, we will start the fieldwork in the campus, which means to discuss with the neutrals to convince them to vote for us” explained a second year student during the meeting.

The work was supervised by the FPM coordinator in the faculty of Economics as well as the representative of the Party for the whole campus of Huvelin. They visited regularly each table and in turn informed Antoine, at that time the head of FPM Student Affairs in charge of private universities in Beirut. The controllers never stayed at one place for long, multiplying aside conversations among them or with the more experienced activists in charge of advising the students realizing the pointages. The meeting thus appeared as a superposition of group work and back-scene exchanges, with some insuring the link between the two dimensions.

Suddenly, after one hour of work, the second year students exulted, claiming to have a margin of fourteen votes over their rivals. Immediately, Dani, representative of the FPM in Huvelin, reacted: “I want you to do a ‘pointage pessimiste’ [a “pessimistic scrutiny”, said in French in the middle of an Arabic sentence]” he warned as he reached the table of the second year students. “But I am sure to win” answered the future candidate, “I got 72 votes and they got only 50!” Danie replied immediately: “I will do it again with you. Don’t count anyone who is not 100% sure to be with us”.

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The list of the second year students was studied again, using this time a slightly different categorization: the neutrals were divided between those having a positive attitude toward the FPM ("neutres plus") and those who seemed closer to the Lebanese Forces views ("neutres moins"). When the students found themselves unable to categorize someone, they discussed about his or her acquaintances or asked one of the more experienced activists who had been working in the university for years. They might know the person in question, his or her friends, or a member of his or her family. When the problem remained unsolved, the first option was to ask for the cell phone paid by the Party – the “Telephone al-Maktab” [the phone of the office] – to call a classmate who would possibly provide an answer. “From which region does he come?” constituted the last mean to determine uncertain cases.

The time passed with a continuous litany of names, followed by the same comments: “ma’nâ” or “dednâ”. After around two and a half hours spent examining the enrolment lists, most of the participants went back home, leaving only the senior activists. It was then around midnight and Dani announced that he would like to work a bit on the electoral program. Only eight activists remained and the work was not intensive. A computer was brought in and a draft program opened. A few ideas were discussed: to organize a “Founders’ Day” in imitation of AUB, to set up a game to attribute the rare available parking places between the students who demanded one, to ask the administration to create assistant positions for deserving students, to organize a “Job fair” to facilitate employment of the graduates, and a photo exhibition about the civil war entitled “student citizen”. Finally, the possibility to create a website to present the program was proposed. No more than one hour was devoted to the discussion. It was then time to tide up and close the office. The discussion between the five last students continued in the stairs and then in the car back to Beirut: “Think about bringing stress-balls and pens for the elections, it would be great!”

Commentary

Being the first of a series of gathering organized between the 21th of October and the 7th of November 2008, date of the elections, this meeting was also typical. The successive encounters were similarly dedicated to the realization of “pointages”, until the eve of the D-day. The activity of scrutinizing the list of enrolled students is both repeated every year and symbolic. As such, it participates in the institutionalization and the ritualization of behaviors observed during the moment of university elections. Starting from this specific activity, it seems possible to draw the structure of signification – or the grammar as I named it in the introductive section – of student politics. The collective practices observed indeed work as a web of significations the actors are using and in which they are evolving. The “pointage” can be considered as a favorite mode in the students' repertoire of action aiming at drawing a line between a “we” and a “them”. A line that symbolizes the essence of the social distinction, the ultimate delimitation as the handling of the case of neutral people illustrates: even they have to be classified between the two rival groups. Significantly, symbols are sometimes drawn on the lists in front of the names to illustrate affiliation: a triangle imitating the Cedar, symbol of the LF, and a “V”, symbolizing the FPM logo.

The duality of the universe displayed by the praxis observed during this and the subsequent meetings refers of course to the competition opposing the two main political forces implanted in Huvelin: the FPM and the Lebanese Forces. Even if other parties are part of the process, the classification remains between “Tayyâr” and “Quwwât”. This distinction operates at several levels
and not only in the here and now of the electoral campaign in USJ as it originates from the struggle that opposed the two sides at the end of the Lebanese wars in 1989-1990, and it echoes a political strife in the national scene. Consequently, it follows that the boundary that sustain the structure of signification produce by the practice of scrutiny is of triple nature in reference to the shaping of the students' political culture as defined by Daniel Cefaï (2001, p. 95-96). It is first a structure of temporality as it consists in the actualization in the time and space of USJ elections of a social distinction previously constructed. It is secondly a structure of interaction because in that context, being “Tayyâr” only acquires meaning because others are positioned as “Quwwât”. Finally, it is a structure of relevance: the boundary institutes meaning about the social and the way it is perceived. It establishes a frame of interpretation of the reality experienced by the students in their university.

The signification introduced by the collective behaviors of the FPM students relies on identity narratives that aim at framing the distinction. Those storylines use symbolic references in order to describe every LF supporter as a deviant: “one who is different from the rest of us, who cannot or will not act as a moral human being” (Becker 1997, p. 34). On that night, when I asked Emile, a third year student in Economics I encountered at the beginning of my research, how he and his fellow-students were able to categorize people, he told me: “Honestly, we can infer from one's look to which group he belongs (...). They [LF militants] are from another kind of society...they are thugs, in the true sense of the term. They are bad people. They wear necklace with their cross-sword [the symbol of the LF militia] so everybody can see it. (...) We try to socialize with the newcomers because many support the FPM but they are scared because they are victims of agressions”32. At several occasions during the following gatherings, students came to me to discuss the way they perceived the difference between themselves and their rivals. The most striking remark I heard was this comment Rawad, another third year student, shared spontaneously with me:

“We are not the same kind of people (...). Did you notice the difference between our profile and theirs? I mean, it's not that we have a better political view, but did you see the human difference? (...) They like to go down in the street with a gun and stay there, just to block the road and claim [the street] is theirs”33.

Segregation is thus argued by students to be social and not political. It apparently depends on differentiated morals related to opposite universes built throughout the history of social relations between the LF and the FPM. It is mainly the armed conflict between the two groups that informed the distinction. The war was waged by Michel Aoun's Army in the name of the restoration of the State and its rule of Law against the chaos embodied by the militiamen. This military opposition has been perpetuated through a political antagonism between the centralism of the State and the autonomy of the confessional segments. Though the content of the political programs of the two movements has changed, their opposition remain. Finally, these contradictions further articulate in

32 Emile, interview with the author: October 21, 2008. The original statement was in French: “Franchement, on peut juger sur le look du type...ils [les FL] sont une autre gamme sociale, ce sont des gens méchants au vrai sens du terme, ils sont vilains. Ils mettent une croix-glaive bien visible. (...) On essaie de sociabiliser avec les 1ères années car beaucoup sont CPL mais ils ont vraiment peur à la fac, ils sont victimes d’agressions”.

33 Rawad, interview with the author: October 30, 2008. In this case, military outfits or laid-back attitudes were pointed out as clues about party membership. The original statement was in French: “Nous n’appartenons pas à la même catégorie de gens. Est-ce que tu as vu la différence entre le type de personne de chez nous et le type de personne de chez eux? Niveau allure, non pas qu’on ait une meilleure politique qu’eux mais...tu as vu la différence de style, de profil, de type?”
the eyes of FPM supporters a social distinction between civilized people from the city and the thugs from the periphery. Again this representation comes from the experience of the LF militia. While the first Christian armed-groups organized around 1975 were composed of volunteer students and urban small bourgeoisie, the continuation of the conflict saw an important transformation of the social origins of the members: in the 1980s, the LF was formed of professional fighters recruited among unemployed people from rural areas (Picard 1994, p. 155). Rawad's claims have to be considered as symbolic narratives, whose composition has to be analyzed in relation to the process of social distinction between the two groups. In this regard, the positions allocated to the student population strongly incorporate the storyline elaborated among the FPM group about militia vs. order. Depending on the partisan labels attached to them, students are inscribed in this narrative about collective identity: LF supporters embody the militia past of their organization and their behaviors are said to be determined by the party’s perceived militia identity. The interpretation of the students about the act of making a “pointage” as such is also dependent on the identity narrative mobilized to define the groups: “as they are an extremist party, they base their scrutiny on sectarian membership (...), but ours is only based on political views”.

As the question about geographical origin of one student presented in the scene one indicates, it however happened during my observations that the sectarian criteria was used to make a guess about the political stand of some students, mainly Muslims (the Sunnis being consider as against the FPM and the Shiites in favour of the Party, due to its alliance with Hezbollah). In addition, I have not noticed whether the Lebanese Forces use a different method to realize their “pointages”. From what I was able to see, the technique they employed seemed extremely similar to what I observed more deeply among FPM students. Therefore the signification of the praxis depends not on the doing as such, but on the being of the actor. Here, to quote Bourdieu, “[t]he power of the categorical judgement of attribution, realised through the institution, is so great that is capable of resisting all practical refutations.” (Bourdieu 1991[1982], p. 124)

As was the case in AUB, the electoral programs in USJ do not focus much attention of the students. They mainly consist of cosmetic side-products of the mobilization. Only a handful of activists participate in their redaction, using the models established during the previous years. As a former FPM coordinator in Huvelin told me during the electoral campaign: “Only three or four people write the programs, which are always almost the same for the various faculties, to display a general vision for the whole university (...). To mobilize as many people as possible beyond politics, we say that we don’t care about political issues...we say that but it’s not true [laughs]! The aim is to attract neutrals, so that is what we do. (...) Who write the programs? It is always the same ones, it’s well known...those who know how to read and write [laughs]!”

The programs are for example apparently deprived of political references, focusing rather on the organization of social activities or on the improvement of the relation between the students and the administration of the university. The form also appears more important than the content. Precisely

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34 Mark, interview with the author: October 27, 2008. The original statement was in French: “Parce qu’ils sont un parti extremist, ils basent leur pointage sur l’appartenance communautaire (...), alors que nous, c’est purement politique.”

35 Junior, interview with the author: October 23, 2008. The original statement was in French: “seules deux ou trois personnes écrivent le programme qui est commun, pour une vision globale pour une Amicale entière (...). Pour ramener le plus de gens possible au-delà de la politique, on dit qu’on s’en fout de la politique...on dit ça, mais ce n’est pas vrai, on ne s’en fout pas [rires]! Le jeu est d’attirer les indépendants, donc on fait ça. (...) Qui rédige les programmes? Ce sont toujours les mêmes, c’est connu...les gens qui savent écrire et lire [rires]!”
in 2008, the LF and its allies in March 14 produced a remarkable program: an actual hard cover A4 book of thirty pages, printed on glossy paper, incorporating photos, and personally addressed to every student of the campus with a name tag and a letter. Undoubtedly produced by professionals, this master piece only briefly mentioned general political stands such as “independence” and “sovereignty” in its short introduction before proposing along the next pages ambitious activities such as a trip to Vienna, a journey in hot-air balloon, or a cruise on the Mediterranean Sea.36

Nevertheless, the deletion of the political dimension is largely fictional. First, some symbols may come as reminders of the partisan identities of the groups in competition: the Cedar displayed on the March 14 program is for example immediately identifiable with the logo of the Lebanese Forces. Second, most of the students perfectly know which political forces stand behind every candidate. This is due to the domination of the partisan perception of space on the one hand, and to the fact that the candidates themselves proclaim in many occasions their own affiliation, yet often cautiously using a graduated scale (independent backed by a party, party supporter, party member). If the programs formally do not exhibit any political signs as such, they are still identified with parties. Third, the propensity to claim political neutrality is in itself ambiguous. Certainly, it represents a tactical mean to persuade the largest possible number of voters. But at the same time, discussions between students on the campus during the time of elections concentrate mainly on political issues. For instance, Junior, who explained the strategic necessity to convince neutrals argued in another occasion that: “To win votes, it’s easy: you link the situation in the university with the geopolitics. For example, you say that if they don’t vote for the FPM, the LF will win and become more popular, thus may win the parliamentary elections. That would trigger a change in international politics, as Lebanon would join the American axis and the Christians would be crushed by the Saudi allies of the Americans, who support the Islamists.” In fact, as he himself put it: “You have different strategies to convince different people!”37

Beyond the varied strategies mobilized in the political competition, the key social processes in action during the electoral circumstances remain essentially the construction and display of concurrent collective identities. What grants electoral practices observed among students their institutive nature is their capability to diffuse or to communicate the partisan distinction they intend to assert. Without a doubt, the differentiation between FPM and LF members seems to operate far beyond the relatively small group of students actively engaged in politics in the university. The core of FPM activists in the faculty of Economics barely exceeds a dozen of people. However, in the meeting I observed along the years, more than fifty persons were regularly present. Not all of them could be considered politically active. Nevertheless, they felt concerned and wanted to position themselves in reference to the division instituted between the two factions. As Joy, a second year student put it: “This country sucks. Some work to change things but it is pointless. The children will

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36 Comparatively, the program produced the next year was much more modest: reproducing the design of the previous one, it consisted in an A5 booklet made of 14 pages.

37 Junior, interview with the author: October 23, 2008. The original statement was in French: “Tu sais très bien comment ramener des voix, c’est facile: tu rattaches la situation de l’université avec la géopolitique! Par exemple en disant que si tu ne votes pas CPL, les FL gagnent, donc ils deviennent plus populaires et gagnent aux élections parlementaires, ce qui provoque un changement dans la politique international, le Liban basculant dans l’axe américain et les Chrétiens vont être bouffés par les alliés Saoudiens des américains qui soutiennent les islamistes. (...) Tu as différentes stratégies pour convaincre différents types de personnes.”
always believe the ideology of their parents. But we participate anyway, to flaunt ourselves. The strong participation in pre-electoral meetings highlights the institutionalized dimension of the polls in the university life. It also serves the interests of the Party, as the more students join, the more names on the enrolment lists can be identified and classified, and the better the scrutiny becomes.

More fundamentally, analysis of the voting results provides an essential clue about the nature of the processes at work in the electoral campaign. First, the high level of participation in the elections is a indication of a process of institutionalization of the vote. The circumstances of the polls in the social setting of the campus encourage the activation of political affiliations and boundaries among the students, generating the positioning of almost all the student population through its electoral choices. In 2008, in the faculty of Economics, the turn-out was outstanding: 379 students out of 425 officially enrolled participated in the polls (111 first-year students out of 125, 98 second-year students out of 105, and 170 third-year students out of 195). The participation therefore reached 89%. The next year, in 2009, it was still 87% for the faculty of Economics (420 voters out of 484 enrolled students). In Huvelin, this ripple effect may be even stronger due to the double polarization of the scene: between March 14 and March 8 on the one hand, as it exists in the national political field, and, in the other hand, between the FPM and the LF. However, the available data concerning the turn-out in AUB elections tend to demonstrate that a high level of participation often prevails in student elections in the circumstances of the electoral campaign: 73,6% of AUB students took part in the 2009 SRC elections, and 68,6% the next year. Yet, in 2010, a revote organized on November 26 for the Sophomores of the faculty of Arts and Sciences gathered only 35,7% (330/927) of the students against 66,1% (613/927) on the election day. This illustrates the importance of the partisan electoral machines deployed during the D-day, but also the impact of the interactional circumstances.

Moreover, according to the electoral rules in effect in USJ in November 2008, every enrolled student was asked to vote for two candidates to represent his class. Although the parties always presented a ticket with two contenders, it was perfectly allowed for the students to choose among all the available candidates, regardless of their affiliations. On November 7, 2008, the day of the election, I was able to follow the counting of the ballots in the faculty of Economics. Only five first-year students out of 111 voters chose two candidates belonging to rival political-based lists. In the second year, only four persons out of 99 did so and in the third year only nine out of 170. The next year, the election bylaws changed. Students were asked to vote for pre-arranged lists and not for individual candidates anymore. The only possibility to demonstrate refusal of the dual dichotomy between the two rival camps was therefore to vote blank. The analysis of the results showed that in the same faculty of Economics, only five first year students among 173 chose to vote blank, one out

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38 Jay, interview with the author: October 21, 2008. The original statement was in French: “Ici, c’est merdique, certains travaillent pour changer mais ça ne sert à rien, les enfants croient toujours en l’idéologie, comme leurs parents. Mais on le fait quand-même, pour s’afficher!”

39 The data were collected through fieldwork observation and completed by the consultation of the archives of the faculty of Economics in Huvelin, November 12, 2009.

40 Sources: Office of the Student Affairs, American University of Beirut.

41 The figures presented here were collected directly in the ballot room during fieldwork as no official data on that specific issue were released by the university.
of 85 in the second year, one out of 108 in the third year, and none out of 54 in the Master years\footnote{Sources: fieldwork observations and consultation of the minutes of the elections, USJ, faculty of Economics, November 2009.}. This tends to prove that the electoral moment is used by the students to position themselves in regard to the distinction introduced by parties' labels. A tendency that prevails at the scale of the entire USJ as the relatively small numbers of elected independent candidates along the years indicates (see tables 1 and 2).

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*The numbers do not take into account 11 seats that were submitted to a re-vote.

Sources: Daily newspapers, fieldwork observations and partisan sources (websites, Internet forums of activists, etc). The differences between the total numbers of seats are due to the change in the elections bylaws on the one hand, and to occasional re-vote operations or the ambiguity of the status of some independent candidates by the parties on the other.

My hypothesis is that the dimension of social positioning plays the central part in determination of the votes. In Lebanon national elections are strongly embedded into local territories: each Lebanese is registered on the electoral lists in the village of his/her grand-father. This sustains the role of family and local anchors in the perception of the voters. On the contrary the territory of university is disconnected from local and family origins. People from different regions are brought into the same space. Further, university represents a specific moment, a bracket in the life's course of the actors.
is a time of emancipation from the control of the family. The disconnection with the family is indeed often put forward by the students, celebrating their newly acquired “liberty”. These two elements suggest that while national elections may encourage voting behaviors taking into account family and local ties, university elections by contrast emphasize much more interactional positioning. As people from various backgrounds gather in the same space, what matters is the relational situation toward alterity. This positioning being mediated by the dominant groupings, it may allow to understand the prominent part played by partisan identification in the students’ votes. To be properly assessed, this hypothesis would require a specifically designed study.

B) Scene two: a “Tayyâr profile”?

Thursday October 23, 2008. Two days after their last meeting, students form the faculty of Economics in Huvelin gathered again in the FPM headquarters. As I arrived in the office, I found them unsurprisingly prepared to continue their scrutiny of the enrolment lists. Some had ordered pizzas and the work slowly got started. The second-year students were the first to lead off. One of their candidates, Georges, who was also the FPM coordinator for his class, organized the task. He nominated two of his comrades to read the name list and another to take notes, insisting on the fact that a clear overview was to be established for the next morning, so the persuasion work on the ground could begin. The gathering counted fifteen students, including six girls, and two male students supporting the Hezbollah. After a few minutes, one of the girls proposed to discuss about an idea for an electoral platform, based on the rights and duties of the USJ students. However, Georges promptly cut off the debate, pointing out that they needed first to position a clutch of “unidentified” students.

The main effort of the meeting however concerned the choice of the last candidate for the third-year students. Several choices remained open to determine who would stand along with Sari as the representative of the FPM in the faculty’s polls. The dilemma was planned to be resolved once again through “pointages”, to select the best possible contender. Three different scenarios were successively tested, using the Excel program running on a lap-top computer to count the potential votes in each case. The operation was repeated several times and lasted in all for more than one hour, interrupted from time to time by separate discussions or interventions from the supervisors of the FPM student affairs’ committee.

As time went by, many students had quitted the meeting. The first and second-year groups had already finished their work and only remained the problem of the third-year candidate to solve. Taking benefit from a short break in the activity, Antoine came close to me: “It’s very important to keep a good atmosphere. We always laugh but still work conscientiously. What I try to do is to communicate my experience. I check how they do things. Because I know them all, I know what may make us win or lose. I know what methods we refuse to apply. Besides, there are sometimes conflicts about the candidates, such as now, and I can talk to each of them to convince the reluctant to accept a solution. Because I know them all, it’s always easier.”

The results of the simulation finally came around midnight. The comparison between the three competing tickets gave rather clear outcomes. It appeared that if Wissam, absent on that night, were chosen as the second contender after Sari, the FPM could obtain 91 and 80 votes respectively for its two candidates to face an estimated score of the Lebanese Forces’ duo of 77 and 69. The party would thus be at risk to lose one seat, a situation that it had not faced in the faculty of Economics in
the past three years. If Rawad, a supporter of the Marada\textsuperscript{43}, were selected, the scores of the Tayyâr would even drop to 87 and 76 against 81 and 71 to their rivals. Finally, with Alex, the situation seemed a bit more profitable with an estimation of 89 and 77 against 88 and 69 for the LF.

The arithmetic conclusion of the operation was thus that Wissam offered more chances to win the two seats at stake in the elections of the third-year students’ representatives. However, this outcome did not seem to please anyone in the group, even less Mike, the FPM coordinator in the faculty. He mentioned that Wissam did not incarnate the profile they were looking for. He looked not serious enough and Mike insisted that he doubted his capacities to handle the campaign. In the middle of this animated discussion, Sari, the first candidate, grabbed Alex by the arm and pulled him into the corridor to discuss. He tried to convince him to run with him in the polls because he surely did not want Wissam as a running-mate. Still, some around the table pointed out that Wissam belonged to the same class than the strongest of the LF candidates. That, according to them, might be a handicap.

Unable to decide, the group turned toward their supervisors. Dani, the FPM head in Huvelin, was the first to be consulted. After looking at the results on the paper, he asked Mike more details about Wissam. As a student in Management, he did not know him very well. Mike, supported by Sari, thus explained that the main problem laid in the attitude of Wissam: “He doesn’t have the Tayyâr profile!” he said. Moreover he continued, in the third-year, an important cluster of students seemed neutral, which called for choosing someone who looked “serious”. According to the group, they were under the influence of another student named Faysal. “Those people like Faysal and his friends are not interested in politics…so they want someone with a profile”. “The previous years, we were able to get people elected although no one in the faculty knew them, because they had the Tayyâr profile: intelligent, hard-working, and serious” someone added. The conclusion sounded plain: Wissam would not be a good choice.

As it was already late in the night, the decision was finally postponed to the next day. While leaving the meeting Rawad turned toward Dani: “With Alex as a candidate, you can stand for elections with your eyes closed! With Wissam...well, keep your eyes open!” The next day, Rawad was designated as the second FPM contestant.

**Commentary**

Considering that the simulated results were the worst possible with Rawad as the second candidate, the choice made by the FPM students appears unexpected. When I expressed my surprise in the next gathering a few days later, I was simply answered that: “it’s not only the votes, there is a whole profile that goes with that”\textsuperscript{44}. The actual reasons why Wissam was not selected remained unclear. Maybe the fact that Rawad represented a party allied with the FPM proved important in the

\textsuperscript{43} The Marada is a small political party organized around the figure of Sleiman Franjieh, the heir of one of the main Christian political family in the history of the country, originated from their bastion of Zgharta in Northern Lebanon. Sleiman Franjieh is the grand-son of a late President of the Republic, Suleiman Franjieh (1970-1976). Known for their close links with the family al-Asad who has reigned over Syria for decades, the Franjiehs strongly opposed the rise of the Lebanese Forces and their struggle for the domination of the Zgharta region during the civil wars. Sleiman’s father, Toni Franjieh, was killed in 1978 along with his wife and 33 other people in a raid organized by the LF commander, at that time Bachir Gemayel, known as the “Massacre of Ehden” (Kassir 1994, p. 331). The killing was perpetuated by a commando led by Samir Geagea, the current leader of the LF. Since 2005 a close alliance has been forged between the Marada and the FPM.

\textsuperscript{44} Mark, interview with the author: October 27, 2008 [in French].
decision. Or maybe personal matters involving Wissam could explain the reluctance of his comrades to choose him. Whatever the motives, the scene in itself appears symbolic as it reveals the construction of both a relation of power and a relation of meaning realized in the course of the electoral operations through the choice of the candidate.

First, the process of selection displays the building of a relation of power in a double way: the domination of the Party over the university space on the one hand and, on the other, the affirmation of a hierarchy between the active students. At the scale of the campus, the FPM intends to establish its electoral domination by relying on the social networks existing between students and on the power of its electoral machine, both means reflecting the Party’s implantation on the ground.

“Pour choisir les candidats, il y a deux profils: celui qui est déjà ami avec la plupart des étudiants. Tout le monde le connaît, mais ça veut dire qu’il y a des pour et des contres. L’avantage c’est que tu sais à l’avance mais le problème est que généralement, il y a peu de marge. L’autre profil correspond à celui que personne ne connaît mais qui est poussé par la machine électorale: on lui apprend comment parler avec les gens, comment se comporter, comment s’asseoir! Les règles de bonnes conduites c’est-à-dire. Au contraire du premier profil, tu es sûr que tu peux construire l’image que tu veux, tu peux travailler sur l’image pour que personne n’aie de problème avec lui. La personne inconnue que la machine électorale présente, elle commence de zéro, au contraire du premier profil où tout est décidé à l’avance, tu as plus de marge de manœuvre (…)”.45

In theory, the choice is made by the students themselves, but the supervisors for the FPM student affairs play an important role, encouraging some against the others. The first profile depends on the social networks established in the most prestigious high schools that constitute the main providers of students for USJ: Notre-Dame of Jamhour, Champville, etc. For example, the FPM uses these networks to frame the student population and possibly recruits new activists. It also takes advantage of these inter-relations to boost its electoral chances. This strategy seems most often deployed for the first year students’ polls, as newcomers remain tightly connected to their school’s comrades. The second profile then tends to become dominant for the second and third years46, even if the two options are in fact not exclusive one from another – the perfect candidate being someone who would combine the advantages of the two profiles. Based on its knowledge of the students’ sociability and on the power of influence of its electoral machine, the selection of a contender therefore enables the Party to validate its domination over the social space of the campus.

45 Ibid.

46 Here is an extract of my fieldwork notes taken on October 23, 2008, after a conversation with Junior, a former coordinator of the FPM in Huvelin: “Concernant le choix des candidats en lui-même, Junior reconnaît qu’il est très influencé par les responsables étudiants du CPL. Techniquement, le choix est en fin de compte fait par les étudiants eux-mêmes mais leurs coordinateurs pèsent largement sur la décision, notamment en mettant certains en avant. Les critères du choix dépendent de l’année: en première année, c’est le nombre de ses ‘amis’ qui est déterminant, ce qui implique de venir d’une grande école qui alimente l’USJ en étudiants telles que Champville, Jamhour, etc. En deuxième année, les choix privilégiés sont les étudiants ‘les plus sympas mais qui travaillent sérieusement’. En troisième année enfin, compte la réputation, le travail universitaire, le sérieux. Pour les candidats en Master, ‘se sont ceux qui veulent…ils s’en foutent des élections, c’est fini…ça fait bien sur le CV d’avoir été élu étudiant, à la limite c’est plutôt pour ça…mais en Master, la politique, c’est fini!’”. The fact that Master students are not interested in politics anymore may be due to several reasons: first, Master students have generally reached the age of 21, so they can participate in national elections, which may limit the attraction of student polls; second, they spend most of their time outside the campus (many of them work part-time to finance their studies or complete internship in order to facilitate their insertion on the labor market) so they find themselves disconnected of the internal interactions built between the students in the university space that fuel the positioning ritual.
The adoption of a candidate also constructs a power relation between FPM students. The interplay I witnessed was undoubtedly related to a struggle of influence between the students, each one trying to impose his decision. Beyond the motives however, the construction of such a hierarchy is legitimized by a narrative about the genuine embodiment of the qualities of the FPM candidate. In that sense, the selection operates as the establishment of a relation of signification, which participates in the construction of the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group. The understanding the Tayyâr profile only makes sense in contrast with the storyline defining the Lebanese Forces’ supporters as thugs whose behaviors are inspired by the militia past of their organization. When students invoked the profile that should match together with the candidate, they repeated once again at the university scale the structuring opposition ascertained in the FPM narrative about social distinction between the za’rân and the âwâdim [honest people]. The choice of a candidate appears consequently as involved in the process of institution of a social line that characterized the ritual of student elections.

Second, a relation of meaning is constructed. The holistic dimension of the distinction in the conception of the political competition voiced by the FPM students is such that those who are not positioned in regard with these two rival categories found themselves expelled from the realm of politics. The case of Faysal and his friends evoked during the meeting offers a striking example. Because they were not identified either with the FPM or with the LF, they were defined as “not interested in politics”. Yet, Faysal was himself the coordinator of the Lebanese Communist Party in Huvelin. The FPM students could not ignore that. However, in the social map they were drawing, this was of minimal importance. What mattered to them was to institute the boundary between them and the LF as the only meaningful distinction to consider during the electoral process, which in itself aims at positioning the student population in respect with this particular social divide. As did the technique of scrutiny, the selection of the FPM candidate appears to reveal an essence, introduce of sense of limits, which inclines people to know their place and define their position in the flow of interactions. Symbolically, choosing a candidate is signifying to him how he should be, how he should behave. To institute a Tayyâr profile amounts to assign a substance to compose of model of identification and, even, an obligation of respecting these attributes.

The institutive nature of student elections is constructed within the group through these practices observed during the pre-electoral meetings. However, it acquires its full potential to create categories in public settings, by exposing the models of identification in front of everyone, informing the members of what they should be and imposing boundaries to the outsiders.

C) Scene three: “Labbayka yâ Emile” – demonstration, imitation and signification

Friday November 7, 2008. Election Day. The voting operations first started in the faculty of Law in which the first year students were called into the ballot room. The process established by the USJ differed from the one existing in AUB. Whereas anyone could vote whenever he/she wanted in AUB, here, all the voters were gathered into a single room at a given time before the doors were closed and the students started to cast their ballots. Sitting at a table guarding the entrance, agents from the administration controlled their student cards before handing them the voting papers to be used: a yellow one in which students had to write the names of the two candidates they wished to elect as representatives and a blue one for the position of President of their faculty’s Amicale. The
parties’ activists swarmed around the table to check with their own list the presence or absence of the electors, trying to gather all of their supporters before the closing of the doors, half an hour later. Tired of their invasive presence, the USJ’s agents finally expelled them.

A comparable scene occurred in each faculty, at the beginning of the electoral process. In the faculty of Management, Huvelin’s biggest institutions, tens of people stood in line in order to reach the ballot room. All of sudden, FPM supporters and their allies started to shout slogans to encourage Emile Daher, their candidate for the presidency of the Amicale: “Yallah Emile, Yallah! [Come on Emile, come on!]”. Pro-LF students immediately answered back, but the security guards of the university rapidly intervened to avoid escalation.

In the university yard, supporters of each camps distributed T-shirts, badges, and other signs of recognition, which often ended up customized by their rivals – erasing a name on a badge to replace it by another, adding a comment on a T-shirt or smearing it with paint. Many were the exchanges between the two sides and it was not rare to see a FPM activist accepting a LF badge. Nevertheless they never wore it more than a few second or altered it, changing the name or putting a new sticker on it. In this small campus, everyone knows each other and friendship outweigh partisan divisions but in the circumstances of the elections, the boundary separating both sides seemed impossible to breach. Nonetheless, the electoral process continued during the whole day in relative calm and a positive atmosphere.

In the faculty of Economics however, many were the incidents. After the votes of the first year students in which LF and FPM each won a seat, things started to become more complicated. After the second year students casted their votes, the ballot box was carried to a new room, in which the count immediately started. Although they arrived quite confident about their victory, FPM activists rapidly disenchanted. The first vote went to the LF and their allies of the Kata’ib and National Liberal Party, whose supporters present in the room celebrated loudly, causing the Dean of the faculty to intervene: “Please, if we applaud each time a ballot is counted, we won’t be able to finish. Keep your celebration for the end”. Finally, the LF obtained 49 and 50 votes for their candidates, against only 48 for both of the FPM contenders. Due to the narrow margin, the Dean first called for a recount. However, under the contradictory pressures of the two sides, she renounced and validated the results, although uncertain. This dramatic ending generated much despair for the FPM supporters. Many, boys and girls, started crying while a fight broke out between the two camps after an exchange of words. Stéphanie, a FPM activist turned toward me, incredulous: “There is something wrong with the count, it’s not possible…it’s not possible that they won!” Another added: “Michel Aoun himself called the USJ faculty of Economics a “FPM fortress” in 2007, now they can claim that they destroyed the fortress!”

The vote of the third year students that followed witnessed another drama. After the count, Rawad, candidate of the FPM, was the only one elected with 87 votes. Behind him, Sari and the best LF contestant obtained 86 votes each. In that case, the bylaws stipulated that the older student would be proclaimed winner. However, the Dean suggested a revote, causing strong protestations from the LF, whose candidate was the older one. They claimed that most of their voters had already left the university and thus refused to participate. After several minutes of confusion, the administration

47 The previous year, the FPM had swept all the thirteen seats in the faculty of Economics. It is also important to remind that the 2008 student elections were held only six months after the violent clashes of May 2008 in Beirut. Stéphanie and Mark conversations with the author: November 7, 2008 [in French].
stepped back once again. The Dean let both sides agree on a negotiated solution. Delegations of each group met in a private room along with administration members. They decided to leave the seat attributed until the results of the election for the presidency of the Amicale. The new elected president would then choose the winner.

These two incidents raised the tension in the campus. As the final results in every faculty approached, sympathizers of both camps started to gather in front of the hall of the faculties of Economics and Management. The rival groups were now side by side in the crowded yard while singing started alternatively:

“Allah, Quwwât, Hakîm⁴⁸ wa bass! [God, the Forces, the Doctor, and that’s all]” repeated the LF supporters.

“Allah, Nasrallah, al-Dâhiyya kella! [God, Nasrallah, and the whole Suburb]” or “Abu Hadi! [the father of Hadi – Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah general secretary of Hezbollah]” and “Abu Mustapha [the father of Mustapha – Nabih Berri, head of Amal]” responded the students claiming loyalty to the Shiite parties Amal and Hezbollah.

“Général [Aoun]! Général!” proclaimed the FPM followers, adding the sound of the car-horn Lebanese used to manifest support to the cause of the General during the Syrian rule over Lebanon.

Every time a result was announced the winning side intoned these chants. The tension rose again with the FPM and its allies claiming the first presidency, in the faculty of Law. Their candidate went out of the building carried in triumph by his comrades. A young girl following the cortege then took out an Amal flag, but several of her friends immediately grabbed it to conceal this partisan sign from the view of the public. Emboldened by their success, FPM and March 8 students won for a while the sound supremacy over the campus.

Waiting for the results in the faculty of Economics with high hopes, pro LF and Kata’eb students nonetheless responded after a few minutes, chanting the name of their successful candidates as well as some “Bachir [Gemayel]! Bachir!” They finally exploded when the victory of their champion, Maroun Keyrouz – son of a LF member of the Parliament – was confirmed. “Quwwât! Quwwât!” resonated in the early nigh. The pressure was then completely reversed in a couple of minutes.

The two sides were now facing each other in front of the faculty of Management, the most important prize of the day due to its size. Alternatively, the two groups chanted the name of their respective candidate for the presidency of the Amicale as well as their favorite slogans. The tension reached its climax, all the more since the faculty of Management symbolizes the difficult cohabitation between LF supporters and the Shiite students whose physical and sound presence at that moment eclipsed the FPM supporters. The situation boiled down to a face to face between the two opponents, one claiming to incarnate the purity of the territory, the other resolved to impose its unwanted presence. “Tonight, we are going to chafe each other. We want a fight, all the Shiites want a fight” confessed a student. Another, a member of the SSNP disclosed a knife that he was hiding under his pants. Finally, the results came. The FPM and March 8 forces carried the day. Emile

⁴⁸ Hakîm is the nickname of the LF leader, Samir Geagea. The word originally means “wise” in Arabic but it is generally used in Lebanon to designate a doctor. Samir Geagea started medical studies before the outbreak of the Lebanese wars but only completed one year before joining the militia. Although he never graduated, his followers have since referred to him as the “Doctor"
Daher, their candidate, made his triumphal appearance out of the faculty under the cheers of his supporters. “Hurriyeh, Siyyâdeh, Istiqlâl!” intoned the FPM followers, while some Shiite students started to sing a surprising: “Labbayka yâ Emile!”

Despite their loss in the faculty of Economics, the FPM and its allies prevailed in the other campuses of the USJ. At the end of the day, their supporters gathered in front of Huvelin, outside the doors, to demonstrate their victory with flags, champagne, and even fireworks. The scene was observed by the security forces who established barriers to prevent the celebrating students to enter the campus. Even if the results in Huvelin were not so good, it was here, in the historical heart of USJ, that the celebration had to take place.

**Commentary**

University elections are a political ritual. The demonstrations associated with the voting operations and the announcement of the results constitutes the main scenes of this ritual. They stage the public manifestation of the social divisions asserted by partisan identity narratives, thus giving materiality to the productions of meaning at work in the interactions between students. These demonstrations consequently play a central role in the acquisition and reinforcement of a vision of reality fragmented along partisan lines. In this process, the physical gathering of rival groups enables a representation – in the theatrical sense – of the distinctive identities, whose significations are expressed both visually and through sounds. As presented in Harré’s positioning theory, the circumstances of the time and space of student elections define a particular repertoire of social acts and significations (Harré 2004, p. 6). The means of communication mobilized by the students to build this repertoire in the flow of interactions enacted during the episode of elections include linguistic performances articulated with symbolic systems.

The first element refers to what is said and done. The chants intoned by the students illustrate perfectly the construction of social illocutionary forces. They define a system of concurrent identities acquiring significance in relation to one another. The parallelism displayed by the slogans of pro-Hezbollah students and LF followers is in that perspective striking. Both clearly enunciate the presence of religion in the partisan affiliation by stating God as the primary reference, the allegiance to a leader, whose name is glorified, and finally the affirmation of the primacy of the group – “the Forces” in the LF case, the reference to the population of the Southern Suburb for Hezbollah’s sympathizers. This last element refers of course to the territorial bastion of the group and can be found in the slogans adopted by other parties, for example the Future Movement: in similar circumstances in AUB, the Future students use to repeat “Allah, Hariri, Tariq al-Jdideh [a Sunni stronghold in Beirut]”. Such formulas obviously operate in a mirror game highlighting the relational positioning of the coexisting partisan identities in the social system. Remarkably, the rival groups use to mark and voice their presence alternatively – most often after winning a seat in

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49 The formulation refers to the ritual of ‘Ashurâ’, during which the Shiites proclaim their loyalty to Husayn: “Labbayka yâ Husayn”. The slogan was then used by Hezbollah during its massive commemoration of the martyrdom of the Imâm. During such gatherings, the crowd usually starts chanting “Labbayka yâ Husayn” to stress their devotion. Confirming the centrality of this theme in a famous speech addressed to the US officials, Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah stipulated what Hezbollah meant by this proclamation.

50 Interestingly, the FPM does not use a similar pattern in most of its chants although they strongly emphasize the figure of the leader. Is it because the FPM has developed more around a political slogan incarnated in the historical character – the General Aoun – who inaugurated it at the end of the Lebanese wars than on a strictly territorial basis? The question will be more precisely addressed in the second and the third parts of this work.
the electoral competition – but rarely at the same time, suggesting that the domination of one overshadows the existence of the other. A reflection confirmed by the observation of the final celebrations: while the winners paraded inside as well as outside the campus, losers tended to disperse without attracting attention. The genuine despair manifested by the defeated students offers another example of the existential nature of the competition.

The circumstances also give birth to specific patterns of distribution of rights and duties in the interactions, each defining a position. Shouting political slogans would not be tolerated at any other moment of the year and only followers of the political parties are able to engage in chants, monopolizing the demonstrative nature of the ritual. In that sense, elections work as an outlet of the political tensions and latent competition that are euphemized in ordinary everyday life of the campus. The ritual marks a condensed time in which the otherwise contained or overshadowed inter-group struggle is publicly assumed. It seems to work as a reminder of the divisions, a reaffirmation of the prevalence of the inter-partisan strife. However, the rights are not the same for all political groupings. The scene in which a student brandished an Amal flag rapidly concealed by her comrades illustrates this: it seems possible to suggest the hypothesis that the presence of the Amal flag in the Christian space of USJ would have been perceived as a provocation, leading the students to spontaneously censure their friend. However, the specific circumstances of the elections also enabled the followers of the Shiite parties Amal and Hezbollah to publicly demonstrate their presence on the campus. A right that they do not enjoy during the rest of the year as the case of Mehdi previously explored illustrated. These students use the ritual as a mean to remind of their presence and to contest the ostracism they usually suffer from some of their comrades.

Finally, the behaviors and meanings are shaped by storylines defining the various positions created by the rituals. To analyze these narratives, it is possible to focus once again on the chants and slogans used by the students. In the case of the FPM, they clearly originated in the history of the movement born with the rise and fall of Michel Aoun. The triptych “Hurriyeh, Siyyâdeh, Istiqlâl!” was the political program of the Prime minister during his term 1988-1990. The car-horn sounds were used as symbols of resistance against the Syrian presence after the destitution of the General and the implementation of the Republic of Taif. The incongruous “Labbayka yà Emile!” also denoted the inscription of the symbols mobilized by the students in the history of partisan movements, in that case Hezbollah. Imitation of acts observed in other political settings plays an important part as the foundations claimed for the groups goes beyond the borders of the campus to embrace partisan sub-communities at the scale of the country. The storylines thus injected into university elections transform them in episodes of partisan history and intergroup struggles. The ritual operate as a performative structure of memory (Bastide 1970). The structure of the slogans associating a religion, a leader, a group, and even a territorial basis conveys a representation of the form of social link on which partisan groupness is based, reinforcing the auto-referential dimension of the group and the boundaries separating it from the outsiders.

Through such repertoires, the student mobilizations publicly abide by a specific vision of the social system. In the context of the ritual, participation necessitates the endorsement of the vision of reality conveyed by the partisan forces, whose influence relies on identification rather than utility. Involvement in the various steps of the rite (pre-electoral meeting, vote, demonstration, and celebration) does not provide an access to material interests nor maximize the potential outcomes of the vote. Those who helped during the meetings or contribute during the day of the elections did not
obtain any kind of material gain. In spite of that, a majority participates. For the students, it is more about being recognized, at least temporarily, as members of a community. Admission within the group implies acceptation from the in-group as well as from the out-group. Participation in the ritual enables such public recognition through the endorsement of the boundaries it institute and the certification of the identity of the group by the use of characteristic illocutionary forces and storylines. As Bourdieu explains, “the act of institution is thus an act of communication, but of particular kind: it signifies to someone what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone” (Bourdieu 1991 [1982], p. 121). The strength of the injunctions concerning the identity incorporated in the illocutionary forces and the storylines mobilized during the ritual imposes characteristics that the members are obliged to comply with to be recognized during the circumstances of the interaction. Positioning oneself as followers of the LF supposes in the episode to affirm one’s allegiance to God and Samir Geagea. Displaying one’s adhesion to the FPM presumes to adhere to the specific definition of history centered on the action and character of Michel Aoun. Although the processes of identification are multiple, the ritual tends to select and legitimize certain forms and meanings of membership, thus providing the students with possible positions and their related rights and duties.

Within the campus, the effects in reality of the social division along partisan line result from the power and symbolic dominance of the political forces in the university. In order to socially exist in these circumstances, the affiliation and attachment to a partisan label seems determinant. Parties’ authority enables them to impose both effective supremacy and signification in the course of interactions. How reluctant the administration was to confront the authority of the students belonging to the FPM and the LF in the contested election in the faculty of Economics offers a perfect example. The Dean let party members decide the outcome of the contested vote, validating the hegemony of the partisan forces in the social setting of the campus. In the circumstances of the elections, parties are more than ever the dominant social actors in the university territory, allowing them to institute their vision of the social reality, at least in the time and space of the electoral interaction.

A comparable situation exists in AUB, where the administration similarly validated the inter-partisan divisions instituted by the mobilization of the political forces. To announce the results, the yard in front of West Hall has been divided in two. The pro-March 14 students take place on one side and the March 8-FPM coalition on the other, the two camps being separated by a 20-meter-wide no man’s land in the middle of which a giant screen displays the results of the elections as soon as they become available. This division was established in 2008, officially to prevent tension between the rivals. As a consequence, the campus physically manifests the political polarization existing on the national scene. As it was the case in USJ, each side vocally acclaims every seat it wins with chants and slogans, eclipsing for a moment the existence of the defeated camp. However, if the current political partition into two coalitions has become formative, it has not overwritten the preexisting partisan identities. As the episode of the “We Will” list illustrated, party-based groupings remain the structuring force beyond political alliances. If the scene nowadays reflects the polarization between March 8 and March 14, the nature of the practices and storylines mobilized to display the collective identities during the demonstration has remained comparable since I first observed the scene in AUB in 2002. The recent dual division has reshaped the context in which the partisan identities are expressed, but has not replaced them. In USJ, the rise of the
movements Amal and Hezbollah supported by the growing Shiite population in the faculty of Management has also altered the conditions of expression of the competing identities, adding a third party to the rivalry between FPM and LF, but has not changed the institutive dimension of the demonstrations, which is still centered on inter-partisan boundaries.

The celebrations of the winning “We Will” campaign staged outside AUB in 2010 offer an interesting illustration. While the losers rapidly disappeared in silence, the followers of Amal, Hezbollah, SSNP and the PSP gathered in front of Main gate to form a motorcade. Brandishing parties’ flags and photos of political leaders, they toured around AUB in a racket of car horns and partisan music, symbolically marking their territorial supremacy. However, the celebration was far from unified. First, FPM students did not participate, because of the tensions that had opposed them to their fellow students of Amal. They instead went to visit Michel Aoun in his residence of Rabieh. The PSP supporters did not join the other members of the coalition in their tour of the campus and remained in front of Main gate, with their own flags and music. Each component of the coalition thus displayed its own symbols, offering at best the image of a patchwork, and not of a united front.

The demonstrations observed during university elections thus determine a social essence and encourage students to position themselves and others in regard to this essence. The social system, within the campus as well as in the Lebanese society as a whole, remains dominated by the fragmentation, whether regional, sectarian, or political, and continues to produce opposing solidarities. The rite seems as much as the echo of this fragmentation as one of the scene of its construction as groups authorized to manifest themselves during the day actualize the body, the memory, the existence of rival social communities and introduce a sense of limits, which inclines people to adopt a specific position and maintains a distance with others. The positioning ritual of student elections therefore appears as a time and space in which the grammar of Lebanese social structure is produced and thus in which identification are constructed and experienced.

Conclusions

To conclude, one has to insist on the circumstances of crisis in which these elections were held. The vote was coming only six months after armed clashes erupted in West Beirut between March 8 and March 14 groups. The vivid memory of violence makes the storyline about irrevocable partisan divisions even more significant and pregnant in the interpretations of the reality. Beyond the Lebanese context, we can make the hypothesis that crises convey representation of the social accentuating divisions, emphasizing narratives about pure “we” against a pure “they” overwriting alternative definitions of the social.

Through the various episodes I presented, it emerges that as other social activities, student elections display specific performances in an interactional setting, using particular modes of action but also of identification supported by storylines aiming at anchoring them in the universe of signification of the actors. Therefore they sustain a grammar of the social, a structure of signification, what Daniel Cefaï defines as an operation of “framing” allowing the alignment of the modes of perception, action, and interpretation. As such, they are constitutive of a political culture understood as “a collective praxis built in contexts of interactions between individuals, networks and organizations, relying on repertoires of identification, narration, and argumentation, on accumulated knowledge
or ranges of social experiences“51 (Cefaï 2001, p. 98). Because they highlight parties’ storylines and stage inter-partisan boundaries, student elections stand as a time and space of production of a specific form of political identification giving birth to social groupings unified around distinctive sub-cultures.

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51 I translated the original formulation from French: “une praxis collective, dans des contextes d’interactions entre individus, entre réseaux et entre organisations, recourant à des répertoires d’identification, de narration et d’argumentation, à des réserves de savoirs ou à des gammes d’expériences”.

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