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# 'Eat, Drink and Be Merry for Tomorrow We Die': Alcohol Practices in Mar Mikhael, Beirut

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► **To cite this version:**

Marie Bonte. 'Eat, Drink and Be Merry for Tomorrow We Die': Alcohol Practices in Mar Mikhael, Beirut. Thomas Thurnell-Read. Drinking Dilemmas. Space, culture and Identity, Routledge; Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, Serie Sociological Futures, 978-1-138-93114-5. halshs-01284742

**HAL Id: halshs-01284742**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01284742>**

Submitted on 8 Mar 2016

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## **6. 'Eat, Drink and Be Merry for Tomorrow We Die': Alcohol Practices in Mar Mikhael, Beirut.**

Marie Bonte

### **Introduction**

*'The world is Beirut again'*

In 2011, an advertising panel surrounding the construction site of Zeituna Bay, the new waterfront bordering Beirut's downtown, proudly displayed this sentence taken from a French journal. 'The world is Beirut again' echoes what many travel magazines and fashion weeklies have described as the rebirth of the city. Indeed, Beirut has been deeply impacted by the Civil War that divided Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 (Kassir 2003, Fregonese 2009, Brones 2010). Thanks to a relative political and economic stability over most of the 2000s decade, Beirut has recovered its strong and diversified nightlife (Kassir 2003) not unlike the permissiveness that had blossomed during the 50s and the 60s. Now completed, the redevelopment of the waterfront embodies the idea that Beirut is a 'playground' (Khalaf, 2012) where rows of yachts, luxury restaurants and pubs add to the numerous bars and nightclubs of the city.

The 'playground' label, however, is double-edged. On the one hand, the permissiveness of the city and its dynamic night-time economy, as well as providing leisure provisions for Lebanese themselves, has attracted many tourists during the last decade generating increased economic activity. On the other hand, the playground aspect of Beirut has a cathartic effect. Nightlife often provides an escape, as was the case during the Civil War and as it seems to be for a post-civil war generation that does not believe in a common future. Many troubles – such as the 33-day Israeli war on Hezbollah in 2006, the crisis of 2008 during which the armed opposition forces, in particular the Hezbollah militia, clashed with the government and seized control of a part of Beirut, and the wave of attacks that followed

Lebanon's involvement in the Syrian war – have once again plunged the country into great instability. In spite of the amount of tourists decreasing every year since 2011 and growth in the wider economy slowing down, the night-time economy of Beirut has continued to prosper as people have sought refuge in bars to flee the chronic uncertainty of their country and carry out what Khalaf (2012) has called a 'culture of escapism'.

### *On studying alcohol in Beirut*

To a certain extent, Beirut's nightlife has become more 'Lebanese' over the last years due to the decline in tourism. The city remains sleepless, appropriated at night by revellers who enjoy flows of alcohol and a variety of bars and clubs. Notably, Beirut nightlife is very nomadic. Partying is a fast-changing process that constantly reshapes the boundaries of the urban nightscape as certain bars, clubs and entire districts fall in and out of fashion. Thus, Beirut's bar scene transformed rapidly between 2011 and 2012, with the district of Mar Mikhael emerging as the new nightlife hotspot. In this new nightlife area, other ways of drinking and other patterns of occupying space by drinking emerged. Strikingly, the drinking in Mar Mikhael often takes place in the public space of the street adjoining the bars whereas, in contrast, in other areas of the city, alcohol consumption has generally taken place behind closed doors within drinking venues. This chapter is an attempt to describe and analyze these new ways of drinking as they are situated in the context of Beirut's nightlife and alcohol-related practices. It focuses on the issue of drinking on the street as a way to overcome some social barriers as well as an action that challenges the traditional meaning of Beirut's nightscape.

By studying space through the lens of alcohol, this chapter is part of an ongoing research project exploring night-time leisure in Beirut. It intends to be a contribution to the field of alcohol, drinking and drunkenness which has, in recent years, made considerable advances in relation to geographical understandings of drinking (Jayne, Valentine, Holloway 2011). Themes like emotions and affect (Jayne, Valentine, Holloway 2010), as well as the historical geography of alcohol production (Burnett 1999) pub life and identity have been studied and allow us to understand how space and place shape

drinking and drunkenness, and vice versa. Moreover, alcohol consumption has been identified as a main feature of sociality in the city at night (Chatterton and Hollands 2003, Shaw 2014). Nevertheless, these advances have invariably concerned drinking spaces in Western countries, where drinking is widely accepted and, in spite of many controversies, is generally seen as an accepted aspect of European and North American societies. In Lebanon, however, while standards are changing, alcohol consumption is far less central and certainly less widely tolerated. Beirut's case provides, then, a decentering insight into the study of alcohol. It addresses drinking practices in an area where alcohol often refers to a question of morality and respectability. In Beirut, drinking is both linked to leisure-time, party and nightlife and refers to morality and visibility. Here, religion and social class are central issues. The location of drinking areas and drinking practices are then partly shaped by this socio-spatial context. The study of the circulation and consumption of alcohol in a district of Beirut reveals that the spatiality of alcohol can be better discussed when taking into account these new territories of empirical investigations.

### *Flows and encroachments*

To question the meaning of new drinking practices emerging in Mar Mikhael, I explore Bayat's (2010) concepts of 'art of presence' and 'encroachments'. Constructed in a middle-eastern context, they refer to the capacity to overcome constraints – here, social and economic constraints – by discovering new spaces within which one can be seen and heard (Bayat 2010). This 'art of presence' becomes more crucial in times of uncertainty and political violence. More broadly, my analysis of a new drinking territory relies on Mary Lawhon's (2013) socio-material hybrid work on alcohol which positions alcohol as a social construct composed of both the natural resources needed to make it and, importantly, the social and cultural features that are ascribed to it. Thus, Lawhon reframes alcohol through the lens of urban political ecology and considers it as a flow that circulates. From this perspective, alcohol is not already in place but comes into and flows through space via interlinked social, economic and political interactions. By focusing on the process of getting alcohol into drinking places, she further enhances our understanding of alcohol and drinking. The case study of Mar

Mikhael then considers alcohol as a socio-material flow in which circulation is shaped by norms and economic processes. Alcohol therefore circulates, continues with consumption and reappears with drunkenness. It creates sociability and transforms the meaning of place by re-configuring social norms in drinking areas.

I base my analysis of the emergence of a new drinking territory on extensive qualitative fieldwork which started in 2011 and focused on Mar Mikhail for a cumulated period of eight months in 2013 and 2014. The study first relies on site observations and second on semi-structured interviews. These interviews involved different kinds of actors: revellers, barmen and pub managers who were between the ages of 22 and 37 at the time of interview. Interviews were complemented by simplified questionnaires conducted in situ among people in the district of Mar Mikhail with questions relating to drinking practices and attitudes. Further still, the analysis presented in the chapter also draws on a variety of secondary sources including press articles, and content from websites and social networking sites, especially Facebook. To understand how drinking practices and drinking places are mutually constructed, I start the chapter by analyzing drinking patterns at work in Lebanon where alcohol is both welcome and despised, and often consumed in an ostentatious way. I then examine the emergence of the new drinking territory of Mar Mikhael, where drinking can be characterized as vertical and visible, contrasting with the alcohol consumption practices that have long dominated Lebanese drinking cultures. Expanding on this, the analysis concludes with a discussion of the temporary reconfiguration of prevailing norms and standards of behaviours at work and its relevance to wider understandings of the role of alcohol in the social life of Beirut.

## **Drinking Patterns in Lebanon**

### *Sober Lebanon?*

The social approach to alcohol, drinking and drunkenness traditionally makes a distinction between countries where alcohol is present and welcome, and countries where alcohol is prohibited. In the

latter, countries where alcohol is formally or informally prohibited, sociability shaped by alcohol is officially absent or hidden and finding alcohol is a real challenge. Offering a glass of alcohol is not a standard of hospitality (Gangloff 2012), with coffee and tea being the drinks most commonly shared socially in public or private places. Problematically, in such countries, there is often no official discourse on moderation. Alcohol is not a public health concern for the State, because it would mean recognizing that alcohol is consumed. It does not mean that alcohol is totally absent but the majority of the population is abstinent. Indeed, alcohol is sometimes informally and traditionally produced and consumed. Lebanon in general, and Beirut especially, are interesting cases within the Middle-East and among predominantly Muslim countries. They are known for posing great challenges to alcohol producers who want to enter a market where most people do not drink. In some cases, alcohol is forbidden by law, as in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. In other countries like the United Arab Emirates or Qatar, the sale is highly controlled meaning only foreign residents can buy alcohol, doing so with a specific authorisation and at licensed shops. In countries such as Egypt or Syria, alcohol consumption is not strictly forbidden by law but subject to social prohibition and control, according to standards of morality and respectability. Although matters of alcohol may be addressed ambiguously in the Quran (Chebel 2009, Amir-Moezzi 2007) and are such subject of ongoing debate, drinking remains contrary to social rules.

In Lebanon, the sale and purchase of alcohol are legal. Since alcohol is only available in some parts of Lebanon, the country can be considered as *in-between* in that only a part of the population drinks. Two main factors explain this situation. First, as a multifaith society Lebanon includes Christian communities for whom alcohol is not prohibited. Indeed, there is a long history of alcohol production and consumption in the form of the traditional production of Arak, a beverage made up with distilled grape juice and anise seed. Moreover, Lebanon is generally considered a more permissive country than its neighbours (Kassir 2003), resulting in a greater availability and visibility of alcohol. These features contribute to the hybridity of people's drinking practices. A survey conducted in 2011 by the World Health Organisation shows that in terms of alcohol consumption, Lebanon is ranked 149<sup>th</sup> amongst 193 countries. However, this seemingly low ranking should be balanced by other statistics.

For example, only 47% of adults consider themselves as abstinent from alcohol (Ghandour, Karam and Maalouf 2009). This is considerably less than the regional average that amounts to 87.8% of adults. Drinking alcohol is widespread among the student population: 40% of Muslim students who consider themselves as believers are used to drinking alcohol regularly. This rate rises to 89% for non-believers<sup>1</sup>. The population of drinkers in Lebanon is not strictly linked to religion: many people enjoy drinking regardless of their faith. As such, Lebanon produces wine, Arak and brews its own beer. Hard liquors such as whisky and vodka are imported; the sustained demand is mostly driven by night-time economy. This observation is not unique to Lebanon: alcohol plays a key role in shaping night-time activities (Chatterton and Hollands 2003), and its promotion is central to the appeal of spaces at night (Shaw 2014). Both the night-time and drinking activities are associated with moments of relaxation and friendship, and many people interviewed in Beirut spontaneously associate alcohol with the night-time. Indeed, during field work when the survey question ‘What is nightlife for you?’ was asked, 63% of people directly responded ‘alcohol’, ‘drinking’ or ‘getting drunk’.

In Lebanon and in Beirut, there are some places where alcohol is available, and some places where it is not. The city then can be described as a patchwork of ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ territories that reveal the complex geographies of alcohol in Beirut.

### *Geographies of alcohol and drinking in Beirut*

To understand this circulation, I draw on Lawhon’s (2013) reading of alcohol in urban environments. She bases her analysis on the understanding of cities coming from urban ecology, which considers cities as spaces of flows (Amin and Thrifts 2002, Castells 2004). The concepts of circulation and metabolism are useful critical lenses through which to examine the urban environment and geography of alcohol. As a part of urban metabolism, the flow of alcohol in Beirut avoids certain areas and can be redirected to new urban nightscapes. In other words, the process of circulating is socially constructed (Smith 2006), and the patterns are not always stable but frequently change and are reconfigured. Getting alcohol into a place depends on economic processes, cultural logics or historical

legacies. If the circulation of alcohol is influenced by the spatial context, as a socio-material hybrid it is intended in turn to shape spaces and relations. In other words, the flow of alcohol is dynamic, meaning that, as Lawhon (2013, 686) suggests ‘the flow does not end with consumption; alcohol also reshapes other flows and relations’.

In Beirut’s case, the spatiality of alcohol is both linked to the residential pattern and the urban nightscape. The circulation of alcohol is shaped by the religious-based separation of city. The city is approximately divided into two parts, a Christian section on the east side of the city, and a Muslim one on the west side. Places where Christians and Muslims live together are rather few. This is a special legacy of the Civil War during which the two sides were tightly divided through the ‘green line’ which has formally disappeared now but reappears in urban mobilities (Bonte and Le Douarin 2014). This patchwork also shapes the flow of alcohol in Beirut with alcohol more freely available in some areas and more fiercely prohibited in other. For instance, in Dahiya, the Shi’ite Beirut suburb controlled by Hizbullah, selling, buying and drinking alcohol is strictly forbidden, and social pressure is exerted to prevent drinking (Deeb and Harb 2013). However, this does not mean that residents of such ‘dry’ districts do not drink as people may cross the immaterial borders to reach Christian areas to have a drink or two, away from the inquisitive gazes and the social control. As a matter of fact, many bartenders interviewed – taking all districts into account – report a significant decrease in consumption during the month of Ramadan.

The circulation of alcohol through the city is also determined by the location of bars, pubs and nightclubs. While this is not to say that alcohol is sold only in pubs and nightclubs, it also being available in supermarkets and grocery stores in Christian areas, it is these nocturnal leisure spaces that are specifically meant to be occupied by drinkers. The social act of drinking takes place in bars, where alcohol is bought, transformed – sometimes admirably by skilful bartenders – and consumed at the same place, shared and is supposed to bring people together. Consequently, the flow of alcohol and Beirut’s nightscape are mutually constructed. The flow avoids residential and mainly Muslim areas. There are no pubs in these areas, and the restaurants do not provide alcohol. Alcohol reaches bars,

nightclubs, pubs, which are mostly concentrated in a few nightlife areas. The map (see figure 1) highlights the nightlife districts in Beirut. The city's downtown includes numerous luxurious restaurants and pubs clustered around Uruguay Street where people sit on terraces, under the gaze of watchmen and Valet Parking. On the west side of the city, Hamra vaguely reminds onlookers of the street's vibrant history: during the sixties and until 1975, the district housed pubs and cafés that attracted students, journalists and intellectuals. Today, pubs have flourished once again and they welcome nostalgic young people who idealise the leftist political tradition associated to those places (Dot-Pouillard 2013). The seafront offers a variety of restaurants where alcohol is available as well as beach clubs that welcome huge parties. On the eastern side of the city, alcohol is available almost everywhere but concentrated in nightlife districts such as Monot, Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael which contain a rich variety of drinking places. The circulation of alcohol then follows paths shaped by residential patterns and nightlife areas and ways of drinking are standardized and referred to as ostentatious drinking.

### Drinking Patterns in Beirut

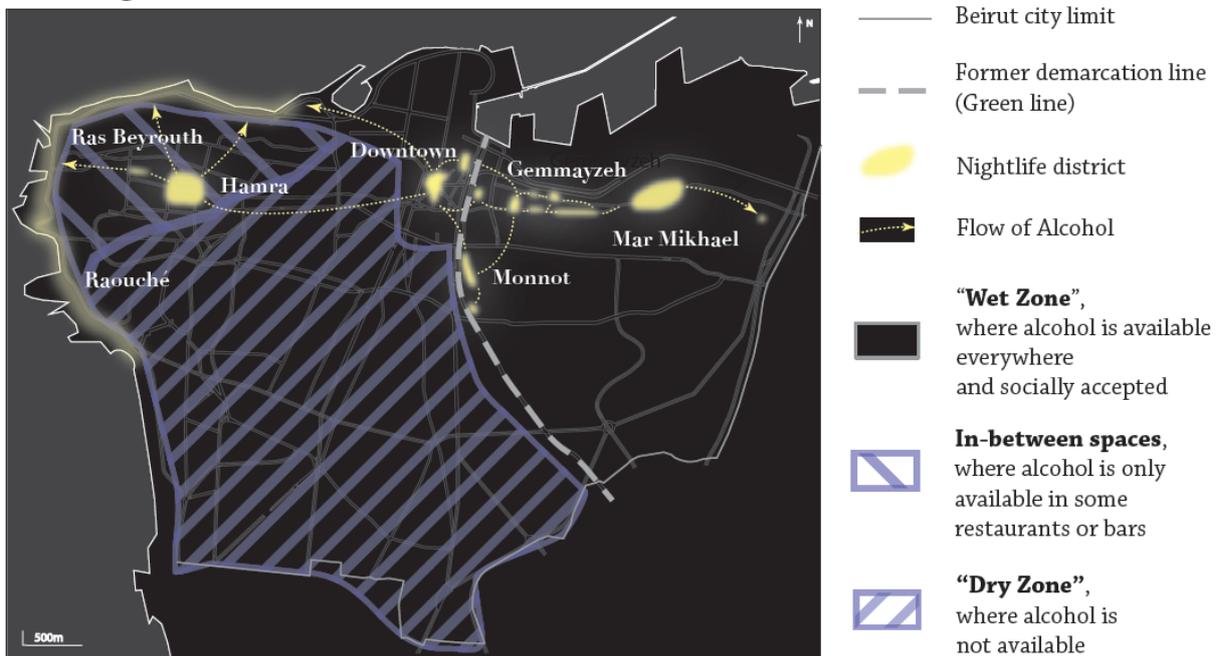


Fig.6.1: Drinking patterns in Beirut

Le Douarin L., Bonte M.

*Ostentatious Drinking*

Only a few years after the end of Civil War, Beirut has recovered its strong and diversified nightlife (Kassir 2003). The city now is on the one hand considered as the paradigm of a violent city that remains divided, and on the other hand is considered as the archetype of the city which rises from its ashes and where partying allegedly has a unifying and cathartic role to play in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation (Boustany 1998). The current nightscape made up of bars and nightclubs is also composed of young and rich partygoers. Despite the greater permissiveness in the city, night-time leisure is less a moment of brotherhood and cohesion than a privilege reserved to a happy few. During the night, one can face a proliferation of real or symbolic barriers which are carefully maintained (Kegels 2007). The first barrier is economic; the entrance to bars and nightclubs are often free but one must drink for a “minimum charge” that can reach 50 or 60 US dollars per person which is prohibitively expensive for many customers. Besides this economic consideration, people have to overcome a social or symbolic barrier, embodied by the bouncer or the unwritten nightclub etiquette which, most notably, uses a dress code to ensure only the ‘right kind’ of patron is granted access. For instance, at the Metis Club in Monot street, revellers are expected to make reservations. The challenge is to get a table as close as possible to the DJ, in order to watch and show one’s central place in the club’s social arena. Typically, the women look very glamorous, with heavily made-up eyes, short sparkling dresses and fashioned hairstyles. The men, carefully dressed with designer shirts, arrive in luxury cars which are then left with valet parking. The impression is therefore one of a visible sense of performance, as if going onto a stage. Going out in Beirut, however, often means coming inside with nocturnal venues if not fully hidden then featuring a clear and well maintained separation between inside and outside. Big doors are well guarded and windows are often lacking or obscured. This may be less true for bars and pubs in Hamra or Gemmayzeh where the separation is more tenuous, but it remains clear that having access to Beirut’s nightlife is often a privilege.

The word ‘ostentatious’ used here refers to the way in which drinking is used as a form of social performance as well as a way to display one’s wealth. It means that the visibility of what is drunk is

more important than the act of drinking itself. It involves in many cases having a table, often itself subject to a 'minimum charge', to which customers order a bottle of wine, vodka, or champagne then brought to the table in a highly visible, and somewhat ritualistic, manner. Drinkers then commonly take group pictures with friends which clearly aim to draw attention to both the well-dressed appearance of the group and of the bottle or elegant and expensive-looking cocktail. Such pictures are evidently produced to be consumed publically when published on social network sites, allowing others to view the assembled scene of drinks and drinkers. This, of course, does not come cheap. Bottles of wine and spirits may cost hundreds of dollars and the price of champagne at *SkyBar*, one of the most prominent luxury venues in Beirut, can reach 10,000 US Dollars. On such occasions, the bottle may be delivered with fireworks or with a spotlight following the bartender to the table, both adding to the sense of occasion as clearly heightening the visibility of both the consumer and the act of consumption. Such ostentatious drinking can be considered as being part of what Veblen (1899) has called 'conspicuous consumption'. Based on a theory of leisure class, conspicuous consumption refers to people who spend money on luxury products or in luxury venues. These lavish expenditures give an indication of their wealth and social status.

Importantly, ostentatious drinking is not necessarily related to drunkenness. While the kind of alcohol that circulates and the music that is played may be similar to other parties all over the world, behaviours involved by drinking radically change. Going out and drinking, especially in nightclubs, often involves remaining sober. Maintaining a proper behaviour is then essential, partly because the partygoers may know each other or be related in a certain way. Many revellers belong to the Lebanese upper or upper-middle class which is visible but not numerically important. They can be identified as Veblen's 'leisure class' even if they work, because they are, through their financial security, more sheltered from everyday problems and many other city residents experience (unreliable electricity and water supplies, and the high costs of living and housing are well discussed by Kegels 2011). Nightlife and particularly drinking are then a display of wealth, excess and waste that can be referred to as 'reckless expenditure' (Bataille 1967). Ostentatious drinking is productive of social status and distinction (Bourdieu 1979) both in reference to economic capital and in cultural capital by

demonstrating taste in the selection of the venue or of the drinks and by symbolic abilities and embodied practices such as the emphasis on remaining sober and in control. After being a question of morality and visibility, and, by this, a question of place, alcohol is consumed in Beirut as a symbol of wealth and status for a limited group of partygoers.

### **Mar Mikhael, a New Drinking Place**

#### *From Gemmayzeh to Mar Mikhael*

As nightlife in Beirut is a very nomadic process, the flow of alcohol is always about to be redirected to new drinking places. Since 2012, the status of the neighbourhood of Mar Mikhael as Beirut's growing party scene is unanimously acknowledged. This small district, actually made up of one main thoroughfare, the Armenia Street, and narrow surrounding streets, is a mixed residential area. Historically, most of the population living there has been Armenian (Krijnen and De Beukelaer 2014). In recent years, Mar Mikhael has become home to pubs, restaurants and art places alongside other businesses such as mechanics and industrial shops opened during the day. The attractiveness of the district is partly due to its architecture and so-called 'authenticity'<sup>ii</sup>, both the cause and result from the process of gentrification<sup>iii</sup> that the neighbourhood is facing. This gentrification is characterized as 'creative' even though there is no state politics to assist entrepreneurs or to facilitate the process. Creative industries here refer both to production and marketing of cultural or artistic goods and services (Zouain, Liatard and Fournier 2011)<sup>iv</sup>. The process of bar and pubs openings then followed the two waves of creative entrepreneurs installation. The first wave started in 2008 and was made up with pioneers attracted by the low prices and the charm of the neighbourhood. A small number of bars and restaurants opened there, for the same reasons, as the example of *Entourage*. As a bartender from this venue explained:

‘We wanted something bigger. We had a vision (...). At the beginning we just opened during the week-end because people were not used to come here. Now we have regular customers. They like being in the middle of nowhere’.

(R., Bartender at “l’Entourage”, 18/03/2011).

Some of these pioneers were bartenders in Gemmayzeh, the former trendy place and neighbouring district. For instance, the owner of *Torino Express*, which is one of the first bars that opened in Gemmayzeh, went on to successfully launch *Internazionale* in Mar Mikhael. The same process happened with the manager of *Charlie’s* who opened *Sector 75* in 2011, a name referring to 1975 and the outbreak of the Civil War, a crucial turning point in Lebanon’s history. Those initiatives have been followed by a second wave of openings starting in 2012. Attracted by the area’s developing creative industries (Zouain *et al.* 2011), the number of bars and restaurants has increased exponentially in 2013 and 2014 with increased levels of involvement from investors. As such, by the end of March 2014, there were approximately 45 venues in Mar Mikhael; only two months later, five more bars had opened. One important aspect of the speed with which new venues open is the relative ease with which new venues are established as owners take advantage of the weaknesses of State and Municipality, often not waiting for the final planning permission agreements before commencing renovation of premises and opening for business. According to the Ministry of Tourism, about three quarters of bars operate illegally (also see Charman, this volume). Often this means that the venue only possesses a license to operate as a restaurant rather than as a bar. While some such venues sell food, many only sell alcohol.

This ‘revival’ has caused a rapid increase of prices with rental fees for ground floor commercial venues nearly tripling since 2011<sup>v</sup>. At the same time, large scale real estate projects developed (Krijnen and De Beukelaer 2014) and live alongside other initiatives like the *Radio Beirut*, the first radio café in the Middle East which is also a live music venue and a social hub for cultural activities, or *961 Beer*, a micro-brewery making original and ‘patriotic’ beers.

### *Overflows of alcohol in Mar Mikhael*

The 'revival of Mar Mikhael' through the implantation of creative industries redirected the flow of alcohol towards the area. Available in the dozens of bars and pubs settled in the main street or in the adjacent lanes, as well as in the grocery shops which open late, alcohol has changed the social space of the district and its visual aspect. As one interviewee explained:

'It's new now. Two years ago there was only one or two places, one called Entourage (...). Entourage was very different; all Mar Mikhael was in Entourage. Just before it closed, two pubs opened, just besides (...). For Lebanese people you take your site, your table, you have your drink, your shit...on your table. Now you take your plastic cup which is definitely not Lebanese. Plastic...when did they have plastic cups?'"(Interview with C.C., 16/07/2013).

In this new drinking territory, about half of the venues are small, cramped bars. They do not have more than three or four tables and a dozen of seats. Consequently, during busy periods, customers are standing inside or outside, even crawling across the bar when, as it is most nights, the place is full. In contrast to the closed or at least heavily regulated frontages of the upmarket bars described above, Mar Mikhael's bars are characterised by their openness the limit between the street and the interior is very tenuous, if not non-existent. In Mar Mikhael, patrons enjoy wider sidewalks – a rare thing in Beirut – where they can stay without violating the 2012 anti-smoking law that some managers are committed to implementing. Some places do not even have a place to sit, instead offering drinks to 'take-away' in plastic cups. For instance, the *Crew Express* neighbouring *Radio Beirut*, is a partial self-service venue where customers take beers from large fridges and pay for them at the counter which opens directly onto the street (see figure 2).



Fig. 6.2: Crew Express, Armenian Street. Picture by M.Bonte, June 2013

The openness of such venues is characterized by the absence of doors or wide windows like at *Internazionale*. It is then quite easy to come and go from the street to the bar, and to walk from bar to bar. Paradoxically, it is also possible to stand at the same place for a whole night and see a very diverse range of people. The *Calle* pub – at the juncture between Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael – takes this principle of an open public drinking space even further. Indeed, the name of the venue, the Spanish translation of ‘street’, literally signals the spatial configuration as prioritising an openness which crosses over between the venue and the street outside. The street lights, the tags and graffiti on the walls, the paved floor are elements meant to recreate an external atmosphere inside. Many people surveyed in the street said they appreciate Mar Mikhael for this spatial configuration that allows being outside, drinking, and meeting new people, with one commenting that ‘I like it, this is casual’, while another explained that ‘this is a more friendly atmosphere than in classy pubs, and alcohol is cheap’. Drinking has indeed become the main purpose for the revellers, and the main nocturnal activity of the area. This feature is claimed by both bartenders and revellers. The owner of one bar described how:

‘A bar is made to talk. Here, we don’t dance. You have to go to the night-clubs to dance. Here, we drink and laugh’. (Interview with M., owner of the “Vyvyan’s.” 25/03/2013)

The cramped bars have a huge range of alcohol options, from cocktails hastily prepared to beers, or more potent shooters of fashionable branded liquors and spirits such as Jägermeister. Alcohol served in Mar Mikhael is cheaper than in other districts like Gemmayzeh or Downtown. The prices also decrease during the ‘Happy Hours’, a period that can extend well beyond a literal hour and continue as late as 11pm, where the discount on drinks can amount to 70% of the normal price. People who come to Mar Mikhael then often drink heavily and do what can be called ‘vertical drinking’. This way of drinking implies having cheap alcohol in large quantities, in places where there are few or no food options and few seats. This is emphasized by the settlement, that preceded the booming of Mar Mikhael, of three grocery stores that sell alcohol until 3 or 4 am. Many customers buy beers individually and drink them outside, on the ground or leaning against the parked cars. Significantly, on Armenia Street drinking is more obviously associated with drunkenness and disorder meaning that during the busiest periods, a mixed crowd invades the pavements of the avenue, can be observed singing and shouting and, on occasions, even climbing over cars unfortunately parked there.

The flow of alcohol plays a role in the reconfiguration of this emerging leisure space. As a Christian area that prior to the current night-life boom boasted enticingly cheap rents and business rates, Mar Mikhail alcohol is consumed in large quantities and according to new standards. As alcohol flows into this space it reappears both in new behaviours such as ‘vertical’ street drinking and, in turn, plays a role in the creation of a new sense of place. Thus, the sociocultural context of Mar Mikhail both facilitates and is in turn reshaped by the flows of alcohol and the actions of drinkers.

### **Cheap and Cheerful: Temporary Reconfiguration of Social Norms**

#### *Blurred lines: alcohol and social barriers*

The drinking place of Mar Mikhael contrasts with other nightlife districts such as Downtown firstly because of people’s appearance. Indeed, the way people are dressed, as well as the way they behave,

is noticeably more casual than the more ostentatious presentation of self (Goffman 1959) described above. When they come to Mar Mikhael, drinkers wear ripped jeans, messy hair sometimes with dreadlocks and young women trade high heels for more comfortable shoes. Intricate make-up and brushings become scarce and eccentric or neglected outfits predominate. This ‘come as you are’ aspect of Mar Mikhael was often stressed by customers interviewed:

‘Mar Mikhael is a gathering concept. Just wear shorts, and flip-flaps, and get a drink.’  
(Interview with C.C., 16/07/2013).

These features may be a fashion phenomenon as well, yet they are related to different behaviours. Due to the permissive aspect of the area, and due to the real or potential drunkenness, allowed by that permissiveness, manners become more casual. The implicit but strict rules of behaviour observed in nightclubs (Kegels 2007) seems to have vanished when people sit on the ground (see pictures in figure 3), drink a greater quantity of alcohol, and sometimes even dare to smoke cannabis joints (a common practice usually strictly confined to private and domestic areas). A more informal atmosphere seems to dominate, where the interactions between fellow drinkers are more direct and uninhibited. Finally, unlike other drinking territories such as Alleway Street in Hamra or Uruguay Street, the music is played at a very acceptable noise level, thus encouraging encounters and conversations amongst friends and between new acquaintances. Thanks to the lower prices, people with more modest incomes can afford drinking there and enjoy the socializing aspect of alcohol. Importantly, while the religious context of Mar Mikhael, being as it is located in a Christian area, is important, some clients appear to prefer going there because of its apparently non-sectarian character<sup>vi</sup> (Krijnen and De Beukelaer 2014). The prominent display of political flags, slogans and posters, almost omnipresent elsewhere in the city, is very far less obvious in Mar Mikhael. Moreover, the area is rather far from the predominantly Muslim residential areas where social control towards alcohol may be stricter and where alcohol is almost impossible to find.



Fig. 3: Drinking outside in Mar Mikhael, Armenian Street. Pictures by M. Bonte, June 2013 and May 2014

The noisy and messy aspect of Mar Mikhael then provides anonymity that enables drinkers to go out and exhibit themselves without being too exposed. Through its informality, it works like a backspace (Goffman 1959/1990) which is paradoxically visible. Tellingly, the space allows gay, lesbian and queer people, who in other contexts have to hide their sexual orientation or identity to avoid insult, harassment, denunciation and even arrests, to enjoy a more open expression of their sexual identity. While Beirut's society remains rather homophobic and queer-friendly locations – outside the half dozen of expensive bars and nightclubs clearly but not officially labelled as 'gay' – are rather few, in Mar Mikhael, it is not unusual to see men or women holding hands or kissing each other, without being evicted from the bar area. Young boys 'wearing T-shirts, tight jeans and sometimes circumspect make-up' (Merabet 2004, 30), who are clearly recognizable as queer, can also enjoy partying and drinking outside. Through these 'playful deviances' (Redmon 2003), the small district turns to be a more mixed area that gathers people who usually do not interact with one another, because of their different social or religious background. Mar Mikhael is therefore a space in which there is a coming together of a far more diverse array of participants than might be witnessed elsewhere in other night-time leisure spaces in Beirut. As a result, Mar Mikhael appears to successfully pull in those drawn by a relaxed, casual and more tolerant atmosphere more reminiscent of the streets of some European capitals. This last assertion refers particularly to Syrian residents or refugees who, by reaching Beirut, can diversify their leisure activities, especially at night. The picture on figure 4, shows a group of

young Syrians having drinks with a group of Lebanese, shouting and laughing. It appears that cheap alcohol and weak social control offer young migrants a window, even temporary, where they can afford, and sometimes be offered, a drink or two.



Figure 6.4: Young Syrian (on the left) having a drink in Mar Mikhael with a group of Lebanese students. Picture by M.Bonte, June 2014.

### *Loud encroachments*

The case study of Mar Mikhail finally raises the question of partying and drinking at times of uncertainty. These acts are related to pleasure and fun; at night, the prevailing standards of behaviour are more flexible and social barriers do not totally disappear but become fuzzier. The flow of alcohol changes the meaning of place. Drinking outside appears as an ‘art of presence’ that challenges the traditional definition of what is a public space and that allows a distinction (also see Wilkinson, this volume).

When they leave the bar for the street, people drink in a space formally considered as public and which is not supposed to accommodate this kind of practice. Indeed and as already mentioned, drinking and particularly drunkenness may be commonplace, yet they belong to private practices and

behaviour. The use of the term 'private' (Ferrié 1995) refers to something known but not admitted, and consequently dissimulated. In Beirut's society, getting drunk, or for that matter being queer, are often relegated to private practices and behaviours. But in Mar Mikhael, drinkers are no longer protected by the bar that isolated them and ensured social homogeneity and privacy. In other words, they become public because they become visible. The shared drinking space combined with a common 'regime of visibility' (Lévy and Lussault 2003) invite us to reconsider the traditional and normative understanding of public space. Indeed, public space is invariably defined by its accessibility, as an open and shared space – a space accessible by *the public* – that could be a microcosm of society or a site of negotiation and, supposedly in Beirut's case, a site of resolution of differences and reconciliation (Kastrissianakis 2013). However, some researchers now encourage another approach that considers public space as an urban practice, 'another way of making the city habitable' (Kastrissianakis 2013). Mostly based on Isaac Joseph's approach of public spaces as places for action that encounter intrusion and are ever-changing (Joseph 1992), this performative definition tends to multiply the number of spaces called public, as well as they turn to be more disseminated and unstable, never permanently settled and constantly negotiated.

In Mar Mikhael, during the course of the night, revellers transform the street from a place accessible by *the public* to a place made by *a public*. They *made it* public by drinking and by taking up space outside. In other words, they change the place by an 'art of presence' (Bayat 2010). The concept of 'art of presence' explains how ordinary people change their society or express their discontent not only through active political use of public space like demonstrations, but rather through ordinary practices of everyday life. Thus, for Bayat (2010) going to university as a woman, selling goods in the street to strive for a better life or, as explored here, drinking in the street are ways in which to imagine how:

'A society, through the practices of daily life, may regenerate itself by affirming the values that deject the authoritarian personality, get ahead of its elites, and

become capable of enforcing its collective sensibilities on the state and its henchmen.’ (Bayat 2010, 249)

These practices are called ‘quiet encroachments’ and can make ‘oneself heard, seen, felt and realized’ (Bayat 2010, 26). In Mar Mikhael, the art of presence lies on drinking in the street and normalizing changing norms and values, and the discontent refers to conflicts in the region, political instability and underlying violence which, put together, create a sense of fear and uncertainty.

Consequently, revellers here by their ‘art of presence’ infringe upon a daily life which does not always suit them. They first distance themselves from an ostentatious drinking, by asserting a cheap and cheerful way of drinking. This performance of drinking outside then becomes a way to stand out from chaos (Kegels 2007) and a political life from which they feel dispossessed. Drinkers create a place where political neutrality is appealing. For example, one person suggested that ‘Mar Mikhael is for people having fun and we don’t care about politics. They don’t represent us’ and another that ‘here you have people who fuck life’. The peaceful and merry although quite drunk atmosphere makes Mar Mikhail’s drinkers ‘the only reasonable people’ in Beirut. In other words, this is a distinction (Bourdieu 1979) which does not happen exclusively in the social space but rather at a political level. This practice is nevertheless visible, noisy and kind of disordered. In Mar Mikhael, noisy drinkers make *loud* encroachments and, by their practice *a priori* commonplace, question and challenge a state of affairs rather than the affairs of the state.

## **Conclusion**

As a part of a wider study on Beirut’s nightlife, this chapter was an attempt to consider drinking as a practice and an action which meaning changes in times of uncertainty and violence. The emergence of Mar Mikhail as the new hotspot of a nomadic nightlife, combined to the redirection of the flow of alcohol through the city, changed the drinking practices and the patterns of occupying space by drinking. Vertical and visible drinking contrasts with the dominant ways of consumption and

reconfigures the prevailing norms and standards of behaviours. Further, in Mar Mikhael, through loud encroachments, people claim a right to have fun and a right to the party(-ing city). Adopting a geographical and de-centred standpoint, it showed how studying drinking beyond the West deepens our understanding of alcohol as a socio-spatial object. This reshaping may be spatially limited and temporary, however it shows how ordinary people change or question a state of facts and remains an act, an 'art of presence'.

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<sup>i</sup> In Lebanon, the religious community is reported on the identity card before being a question of faith.

<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, many traditional homes from the 30's survived and sometimes welcome restaurants, like the 'Villa Clara' hotel or 'Toto'.

<sup>iii</sup> Understood here in its broad definition, namely 'a socioeconomic and cultural transformation due to middle-class colonization or recolonization of working-class spaces', involving the displacement of 'people with less power and means' (Krijnen, De Beukelaer, 2014).

<sup>iv</sup> The NGO GAIA-Heritage suggested a typology of creative industries bringing together architecture, design, new technologies, advertising, communication, art galleries.

<sup>v</sup> These figures refer to an interview of Karl Sarkis, managing director of Blox Real Estate Services.

<sup>vi</sup> The Armenian community remained neutral during the Civil War, and today, the Armenian districts – which are also huge commercial areas – attract customers from all religions (Khayat in Ghorra-Gobin, 2001).