

The Agnotology of Eviction in South Lebanon’s Palestinian Gatherings

How institutional ambiguity and deliberate ignorance shape sensitive spaces

Nora Stel

[Nora Stel](#) is Assistant Professor at [Maastricht School of Management](#); PhD Candidate at Utrecht University’s [Center for Conflict Studies](#); and Affiliated Scholar at the American University of Beirut’s [Issam Fares Institute](#) for Public Policy and International Affairs.

Contact: stel@msm.nl and/or n.m.stell@uu.nl

Address: Maastricht School of Management, PO Box 1203, 6201 BE Maastricht (the Netherlands)

Abstract

A significant part of Lebanon’s Palestinian refugees live in unofficial camps, so-called ‘gatherings’, where they reside on Lebanese land. Many of these gatherings are now threatened with eviction. By means of two qualitative case-studies this article explores responses to such eviction threats. Residents, it turns out, engage in deliberate disinformation and stalling tactics and invoke both a professed and real ignorance about their situation. In contrast to dominant discourses that project Palestinian refugees as illicit and sovereignty-undermining, I explain these tactics as a reaction to, and duplication of, a ‘politics of uncertainty’ implemented by Lebanese authorities. Drawing on agnotology theory, and reconsidering the gatherings as sensitive spaces subjected to aleatory governance, I propose that residents’ responses to the looming evictions are a manifestation of the deliberate institutional ambiguity that Lebanese authorities impose on the gatherings. As such, the article contributes to understanding the spatial dimensions of strategically imposed ignorance.

Praxis abstract

Refugee camps and informal settlements often fall outside regular governance mandates and legal frameworks. The resultant coping mechanisms of the people living in such ‘spaces of exception’ are habitually cast as undermining authorities’ attempts for regularization and potentially threatening state sovereignty. Case-studies of eviction threats in unofficial Palestinian camps in South Lebanon, however, demonstrate that residents’ tactics are a duplication of a ‘politics of uncertainty’ implemented by authorities. In such instances, then, institutional ambiguity is an intentional disciplinary technique rather than a contingency of governance deficits. This means that any form of support for marginalized communities residing in camps or informal settlements should acknowledge that short-term coping mechanisms often buttress the very exceptionalism and ambiguity that causes residents’ predicaments in the first place. Policy implications for such

settings similarly need to account for the fact that the governing regularly have a stake in maintaining the status quo ruled by ambiguity.

Keywords: agnotology, institutional ambiguity, eviction, informal settlements, Palestinian refugees, Lebanon

Like knowledge or wealth or poverty, ignorance has a face, a house, and a price: it is encouraged here and discouraged there from ten thousand accidents (and deliberations) of social fortune (Proctor, 2008:6).

The situation here is totally clouded and unclear. And it is meant to be cloudy; we are not supposed to understand (Leader of a Palestinian youth movement, 7 May 2013)

Agnotology, the study of socially constructed and politically imposed ignorance, is remarkably underdeveloped (Slater, 2012:951). This is problematic because information is more often than not incorrect or incomplete and because the limitations that are placed on knowledge determine decision-making (Bernstein, 1998:207; Croissant, 2014:12). The ‘sociological ignorance of ignorance’ is particularly profound with regard to the spatial dimensions of not-knowing (McGoey, 2012b:554). As Proctor (1995:8), the trailblazer of agnotology, notes, agnotology has a ‘distinct and changing political geography that is often an excellent indicator of the politics of knowledge.’ Exploring the spatial manifestations of ignorance, then, is a logical priority in the attempt to further agnotology. It is, after all, through material demarcations and geographical categorizations that social processes, including the making and unmaking of ignorance, happen (Gieryn, 2000:465).

The intention of this article, therefore, is to make a contribution to the political geography of agnotology. It seeks to do so by studying the politics of eviction in informal Palestinian settlements in South Lebanon. A significant part of Lebanon’s 400,000 Palestinian refugees live in unofficial camps, or ‘gatherings,’ where they reside on public and privately owned Lebanese land. Many of these gatherings currently face eviction threats. This article explores residents’ responses to such looming eviction by means of two qualitative case-studies. Inhabitants of the gatherings generate deliberate disinformation, employ stalling tactics and invoke both professed and real ignorance about their predicament. While Lebanese authorities consequently portray Palestinian refugees as disruptive and sovereignty-undermining, I suggest these tactics are, rather, a reaction to, and duplication of, the institutional ambiguity that Lebanese authorities implement in the gatherings.

Drawing on agnotology theory, my argument thus entails two levels of intentional elusiveness. On the one hand, the Lebanese state imposes a regime of ‘institutional ambiguity’ on the gatherings. On the other, inhabitants of the gatherings respond to this with what I call ‘deliberate ignorance.’ My cases, then, concern spatially determined forms of not-knowing and are consequently particularly well-suited to an agnotological analysis. Such an analysis suggests that the gatherings can be understood as sensitive spaces that are governed on the basis of aleatory sovereignty. Dunn and Cons (2014:102) introduce aleatory sovereignty, rule by chance, as ‘the constant making and remaking of shifting landscapes of unpredictable power.’ It is the spatial demarcations and specificities of this unpredictability of power, so evident in Lebanon’s Palestinian gatherings, that can advance agnotology. The article therefore integrates the concepts of sensitive spaces and aleatory governance into the nascent theory of agnotology to enable the understanding of the spatial dimensions of strategically imposed ignorance.

My argument is developed in three sections. I begin by outlining my analytical framework. I then proceed with a discussion of the case-studies in which I analyze specific instances of looming eviction and residents' responses to them in light of institutional ambiguity and deliberate ignorance. The concluding section integrates the political geography notions of (sensitive) space and (aleatory) governance into the agnotology frame and draws out implications of such a spatialized agnotology with reference to epistemology and agency.

Agnotology

'There is more information we don't know than we do know for making most critical decisions' (Rowe, 1994:743). Following this truism, uncertainty, ambiguity and ignorance (or 'informational boundedness') have been pivotal issues in law, psychology, economics, and organization and management (Congleton, 2001:39; Cowan, 2004). Scholars like Kutsch and Hall (2010), for instance, explore the managerial effects of withholding information from others on the one hand and 'deliberate inattention' to information inconvenient to the self on the other. Yet, overall, economists, management scholars and organizational theorists treat ignorance as a contingency to be reduced or eliminated (Einhorn and Hogarth, 1986:226). Taking its cues from political sociology, agnotology, conversely, engages with the functionality of ignorance.

Building on concepts such as 'structural amnesia,' 'non-thinking' and 'states of denial,' agnotology refers to a social theory of ignorance that supposes that ignorance is a 'fundamental influence in human cognition, emotion, action, social relations, and culture' (Smithson, 2008:209). As such, it is based on three core premises: that ignorance is pervasive; that it is socially constructed; and that it can be advantageous (Smithson, 2008:209). In coining the notion of agnotology, Proctor (2008:3) distinguishes between three forms of ignorance: ignorance as 'native state;' ignorance as 'lost realm;' and ignorance as 'a deliberately engineered and strategic ploy.' It is the latter, specifically political, category that I draw on (Slater, 2012:951). Agnotology is then closely related to what Jones (2014:799) calls the 'politics of uncertainty:' the manufacturing of doubt and ignorance to accrue profit and power.

Ignorance, from this perspective, is not 'a simple omission or gap,' but 'something that is made, maintained, and manipulated' (Proctor, 2008:9); the product of cultural and political struggles (Slater, 2012:951). This means that ignorance and knowledge are 'equal tools of governance and usurpation' (McGoey, 2012a:10). In the form of diverting attention, exploiting doubt and ignoring (or actively marginalizing) alternative understandings, ignorance can be a productive asset to justify inaction and evade responsibility (McGoey, 2012b:553; Slater, 2012:961; Smithson, 2008:223).

Such production of ignorance has two dimensions (Proctor, 2008:14; Slater, 2012:950). On the one hand, social actors – be they individuals, communities or organizations – protect or profess their own ignorance. On the other hand, they manufacture the ignorance of others. These two dimensions are closely intertwined. As I demonstrate below, the response to imposed ignorance is

often further maintained or feigned ignorance; the latter a form of resistance to or coping with the dominance implicated in the former (Gupta, 2012:42). Following Taussig's dictum that knowing what not to know is a crucial kind of socio-political knowledge, what this branch of agnotology is ultimately interested in is 'the knowledge of what individuals aspire and struggle [and pretend] not to know' (McGoey, 2012b: 554, 571). This has implications for scale. Agnotology is not so much concerned with individual ignorance (clearly, not everyone can, wants to or should know everything). What is at stake for agnotologists is socially deliberate ignorance. As Croissant (2014:10) notes, ignorance is inevitably 'wrapped up in economic, political, cultural, and ideological processes.'

This underlines the most enigmatic aspect of ignorance: its intentionality – how to prove that knowledge that is not there, is not there on purpose? In McGoey's (2012b:559) eloquent words: 'The pyrrhic challenge for scholars of ignorance is to prove the existence of something for which the very ability to evade detection is a key criterion of success' (see also Scott, 1985:290 and 1990:199-200). There is a crucial difference between ignorance in the active form ('ignoring') and ignorance in its passive form ('being ignorant') but this difference is innately complicated to pin down (Smithson, 2008:210). Agnotology, nevertheless, aims to differentiate between 'things we don't know we don't know and things we know we don't know' (McGoey, 2012b:558-9). It is the latter form – the things people know they don't know but don't want to know (deliberate ignorance) and the things they know but pretend not to know (professed ignorance) – that is of specific relevance to my argument.

While locating and explaining such conscious ignorance is per definition elusive, recognizing that 'intentionally produced agnoses' have a political geography is a useful starting point (Croissant, 2014:11). Following Proctor (2008:6), this prompts me to explore where there is ignorance (and why there rather than elsewhere). The distribution of ignorance is never even. For Proctor (2008:26), 'the geography of ignorance has mountains and valleys,' which leads to questions such as: 'Ignorance for whom? And against whom?' Marxist, feminist and postcolonial theories have conclusively demonstrated that class, gender and race 'produce absences of knowledge' (Croissant, 2014:11; see also Slater, 2012:951). This also brings to the fore 'the troubling relationship between (mis)information and state power' that is central in my analysis (Slater, 2012:948; see also Gupta, 2012; Hull, 2012:25).

Departing from these intellectual traditions, I distance myself from Orientalist or developmentalist associations of ignorance with backwardness, irrationality or inferiority (Gupta, 2012:196). Ignorance, in this article, simply refers to (sometimes strategically imposed or simulated) not-knowing. In the following sections I explore the spatial manifestations of such not-knowing by investigating how residents of Lebanon's Palestinian gatherings employ deliberate and professed ignorance in order to deal with eviction threats and how these responses are related to the pervasive institutional ambiguity that these localities are subjected to.

Evictions in Lebanon's Palestinian gatherings

Palestinian refugees constitute roughly ten per cent of Lebanon's population¹ and are Lebanon's most disenfranchised community: they are withheld citizenship, are legally discriminated against in the labour market and cannot own real estate. Since their arrival in Lebanon during and after the 1948 *Nakba*,² consecutive Lebanese governments have feared that naturalization of the largely Sunni Muslim Palestinians would upset Lebanon's precarious sectarian balance. Lebanese political leaders have habitually cast any form of relieving the Palestinians' plight as a first step towards naturalization (and hence intra-Lebanese conflict) (Meier, 2010). The ensuing marginalization has been defended with the claim that maintaining the Palestinians' destitution serves to keep pressure on Israel to fulfill the Palestinians' right to return to Palestine. As a result, governance of and within the Palestinian communities in Lebanon is dictated by a 'state of exception' and remains without regularization, recognition or formalization (Hanafi and Long, 2010). Lebanon's Palestinian refugees 'hover in an ill-defined space, out of place and between states, as Lebanon denies their naturalization and Israel rejects their return' (Allan, 2014:10).

This legal and political marginalization has clear spatial components. It is affected by the differing politico-institutional status of various categories of territories and epitomized in land and tenure issues. The majority of Lebanon's Palestinian refugees live in official refugee camps where the Lebanese state has ceded much of its sovereignty through the Cairo Agreement.³ Indeed, Lebanon's Palestinian camps are popularly regarded as 'states-within-the-state' (Czajka, 2012; Meier, 2010). The camps are administered by the United Nations Works and Relief Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and governed by Popular Committees installed by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Not all Palestinians in Lebanon, however, live in these official camps. Many⁴ of them reside in gatherings, informal camps that are not recognized by the Lebanese government and have been surprisingly under-researched (Martin, 2011:138; Ramadan, 2009b:662; Stel, 2014).

There are some 42 gatherings in Lebanon, 26 of them located in the South (Chabaan, 2014; Danish Refugee Council (DRC), 2005). Residents of the gatherings fall largely outside UNRWA's service mandate (Hilal, 2010; Williams, 2011). Lebanese municipalities do not consider the gatherings their responsibility either, as residents are neither citizens nor tax-payers. Responsibility for and control of the gatherings are consequently taken up by an amalgamated array of actors ranging from Popular Committees, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UNRWA to Lebanese and Palestinian political factions and Lebanese state officials such as *mukhtars*,⁵ mayors and utility companies (Stel, 2016).

The institutional ambiguity inside the gatherings is closely related to, and hence most evident in, housing, land and property issues. As Sanyal (2011:882) explains, 'the Lebanese authorities insisted on keeping the structures of the camps temporary' in order to maintain the temporary nature of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon. Palestinians are legally prohibited from owning land or real estate since 2001, because, according to Lebanese authorities, allowing Palestinian refugees to own a home encourages them to envision their future in Lebanon rather than a prospective Palestinian state (Martin, 2011:101). Palestinians residing in Lebanon's official camps

live on land rented by UNRWA from the Lebanese state and hence face a notoriously cramped and deprived but also relatively stable tenure condition.⁶ The gatherings, however, are built on Lebanese land without permission, which renders the residents' tenure situation there extremely insecure (Rasul, 2013; Williams, 2011:31). Moreover, while restrictions on construction and maintenance are salient aspects of the gatherings' tenure insecurity it is the increasing threat of eviction of already existing houses that is the quintessential manifestation of 'spacio-cide' techniques: as argued by Martin (2011:170) and Ramadan (2009a:156) the destruction of material structures to deny Palestinians' living space is part of a broader process of cultural and political annihilation (see also Beer, 2011; Chabaan, 2014; Rasul, 2013; Williams, 2011). It is instances of eviction in the gatherings, therefore, on which my study turns.

The argument made below is based on the in-depth analysis of nascent eviction in the gatherings of Shabriha and Qasmiye, two of Lebanon's largest gatherings.⁷ Data were generated during twelve months of fieldwork (eight of which I lived in Qasmiye and Shabriha) by means of over 250 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, four focus groups, document analysis and field observations. Considering that I was trying to study a phenomenon, ignorance, which is by definition ephemeral, the analysis of these data was challenging. Throughout my exploration, I draw on Scott's (1990:199-200) suggestions on how to study infrapolitics, 'political action [that] is studiously designed to be anonymous or to disclaim its purpose, [and therefore] requires more than a little interpretation.' Because my interest regarded things people knew they did not know or pretended not to know, careful triangulation – juxtaposing accounts from different categories of respondents and different forms of data – and immersion – personally experiencing to which extent information was (not) available – made it possible to unravel how and why people have protected, invoked and claimed ignorance despite the fact that they might in many cases have had an interest in misrepresentation (Scott, 1985:45-46).

Eviction threats in Shabriha and Qasmiye

Shabriha gathering is located predominantly on public land owned by the municipality of Abasiye. As with most other gatherings in South Lebanon, the settlement was created in the early 1950s by Bedouin tribes that saw the official UNRWA camps as unsuitable places to accommodate their cattle and preferred to settle near the orchards where they had found work. It was only after the chaos of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) ended that the gathering's illegality became salient. But actual eviction seems never to have been on the agenda until 2005. Then, the residents of approximately 30 houses in the upper area of Shabriha received a message that 'their' land would be expropriated in the construction process of the Zahrani-Qana highway. The project started in 1996, but it was only in 2005 that the expropriation case was taken to court by the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR). Due to the complicated situation with the non-owner-residents extensive hearings were required. However, in 2007, residents reported that engineers came to mark houses. In 2010, construction started with more houses added to the eviction list. In 2013, engineering teams arrived in the gathering and signalled that the construction of the highway in Shabriha was imminent.

Qasmiye falls within the cadastral boundaries of Bourj Rahaal municipality. Some twenty per cent of the land on which the gathering is built is public (municipal) land; the rest is the property of a variety of Lebanese private owners (DRC, 2005:152). In the 1950s, most of these landowners gave the Palestinians, often their field laborers, permission to live on their lands. Their heirs, facing ever expanding construction and encouraged by rising property prices, however, no longer feel bound by the promises their (grand)fathers made (Beer, 2011:36). Many of them have started law suits against the Palestinians ‘occupying’ their land. In 1997, the residents of approximately fifty houses in the area in Upper Qasmiye were accused of illegally residing and building on private land and summoned to court. After almost a decade of recurrent court sessions, the judge in Sur ruled in favor of the landowner in 2006. In 2010, the residents’ appeal was rejected by the court in Saida as well. One year later, the residents received a warrant from the police that informed them that they had five days to leave. The people I spoke with, however, lacking any alternative residence, refused to leave. Nor did the police come to physically evict them.

Residents’ responses

Thus, the eviction threats in Shabriha and Qasmiye have reached an impasse. In both cases, eviction warrants have been issued, but not implemented. In both cases, also, residents’ responses to their looming displacement are characterized by two interdependent strategies: stalling and ignoring. Residents are aware that in a legal sense they cannot claim ownership of either their land or their houses (Beer, 2011:6). As the judge in charge of the Shabriha case said: ‘We’re looking for a practical solution, not a legal one. Because legally, they don’t have any rights.’⁸

In light of this, residents in both cases have sought to stall and evade the evictions rather than dispute them in legal terms. Reference to political parties has been critical here (Rasul, 2013:47). In Qasmiye, Palestinian political leaders discussed the matter with Nabih Berri, Speaker of Parliament and leader of the Amal party that is dominant in the region. Berri agreed that ‘it would not be acceptable to have people say that in the South they destroy Palestinian houses’ and instructed the police charged with implementing the eviction order to refrain from doing so.⁹ In Shabriha, a committee of affected residents contacted representatives of Palestinian political parties, in the hope that these would subsequently address their Lebanese counterparts who might then take the matter up with the CDR. A representative of an NGO involved in the case explained that he did not contact the CDR directly, but instead approached political parties, because the CDR engineers ‘get their orders from the politicians anyway. [...] There are no legal solutions; it’s about political interference.’¹⁰

Apart from getting politicians to ‘freeze’ court cases, residents themselves also seek to stall or sabotage the legal processes that would enable their expulsion. It is here that their ignorance comes in. This ignorance takes various forms. In some instances, people did not have the relevant information – either because they were unaware the information existed or was worth knowing or because they were unable to get it. At other times, residents claimed not to know things they arguably knew. Also, residents refused to know things they could have known, choosing not to

know. A policy analyst described this posture as cherishing ‘loose ends: people don’t get to the bottom; they open something, have a look and put the lid back on.’¹¹

Residents claimed they had been ignorant of the illegality of their situation. In Qasmiye, a sheikh maintained that: ‘When we built here we were under the impression that the land belonged to the municipality. Only later did we find out that it belonged to the [landowner].’¹² An observer, however, assured me that ‘They knew very well the land was owned.’¹³ Indeed, people I interviewed admitted that they were aware that they were living on privately owned land but referred to a ‘right of use’, reasoning that their continuous presence on and cultivation of the land legitimizes their stay. In addition, residents insisted that the previous owner had given them permission. Both assertions allowed them to ‘claim to have been taken unawares by the impending eviction’ (Ramakrishnan, 2014:766).

Besides such professed ignorance, residents actually ignored the impending evictions as long as they possibly could, intentionally maintaining their not-knowing. While in both cases there had been indications of eviction threats from the early 1990s onwards, it was only when they saw actual state representatives (police with warrants in Qasmiye and CDR engineers in Shabriha) that residents began to really engage with the situation. During my stay in Qasmiye and Shabriha, I was struck, at first, by how little people seemed to know about their case. Certainly, landownership is a complicated matter and ‘a lack of knowledge of the legal ownership and zoning of land in the gatherings is commonplace’ (Beer, 2013:36).

Considering the pertinence of their case, however, I was surprised that people often did not even know who owned the land they lived on. In Qasmiye, stories about the amount of houses involved in the case were widely divergent, with numbers of affected households ranging from 38 to 120.¹⁴ In Shabriha, accounts of when the court case had started and whether the final decision was reached yet differed remarkably. People made clear that they had no understanding of the legal workings of the court cases, which made the proceedings seem entirely random to them. Residents would recount how the issue ‘comes up time and again,’¹⁵ ‘like a volcano it is calm for a while and then it awakens.’¹⁶ This confirms Rasul’s (2013:38) observation that residents of the gatherings ‘exhibited an overwhelming feeling of helplessness and apathy towards finding solutions for HLP [housing, land and property] issues.’

Yet, much of residents’ ‘disinterest’ and ‘unawareness’ was deliberate; a form of ‘strategic not-wanting-to-know,’ as Croissant (2014:12) calls it. In fact, ignoring in this context can be considered a form of resistance (Cowan, 2004:931). A legal aid worker observed that many people are so scared they ‘don’t even want to know the details.’¹⁷ In Qasmiye, affected residents were notified personally by the court. Even if they did not understand the legalistic jargon of the court’s communication, they could have made an effort to have it explained to them. Yet, legal awareness raising sessions were, according to the NGO that organized them, not broadly frequented. In Shabriha as well, residents adhered to a strategic ‘what you don’t know can’t hurt you’ motto (McGoey, 2012b:554). The inclusion of part of Shabriha in the lands expropriated for the highway was nationally broadcasted in a 1996 decree. And while residents can perhaps not be expected to

closely follow all such decrees, all people I interviewed were aware of its existence. Yet none of them had tried to obtain and read it. Likewise, while several maps indicating which houses would be affected circulated among residents, most of them said they had made no efforts to look into them.

There is, however, a ‘productive pragmatism’ that often lies behind such ‘ritualized forms of apparent idleness’ (Allan, 2014:141; see also Scott, 2009). Ismail (2006:161) reminds us that ‘inaction, passivity, evasion, and fear are all features of encounters with the everyday state.’ If, as Gupta (2012:268) puts it, ‘biopolitics depends on knowledge of the population,’ maintaining ‘institutional invisibility’ would logically be a key priority for those facing eviction (Scott, 1985:35). Residents’ adherence to (professed or maintained) ignorance stems from their assumption that maintaining and inciting uncertainty can help them prevent eviction. And indeed, ‘false compliance’ and ‘footdragging’ tactics, theorized by Scott (1985 and 1990) as ‘everyday resistance’ and the ‘infrapolitics of the powerless’¹⁸ – have served the gatherings so far (Bayat, 1997:56). By avoiding registration, for instance, Qasmiye’s residents have successfully delayed the court process. The court proceedings of 14 February 2002 state that:

The prosecutors do not show in their accusation the complete identity of some of the accused people [...] And the investigation by the police in Abasiye did not result in complete knowledge about the identity of all accused [...] The court will have to withdraw charges against those persons vis-à-vis whom the prosecutors could not fulfill the legal stipulation to provide the necessary personal information to press charges.¹⁹

Under Lebanese law, every individual accused in court has to be notified. If the person has no designated address – or in this case if the designated address cannot be tied to a registered person – the court has to resort to other notification mechanisms that can severely delay the process. Qasmiye’s residents aptly utilized such stalling tactics to put ‘sand in the gears’ of the judicial process (Proctor, 2008:17). The landowner admitted that the court case was effectively frustrated by the residents ‘absenting’ themselves when ‘someone from the court comes knocking on their doors.’²⁰

Ultimately, of course, ‘playing dumb’ will not prevent eviction. Nevertheless, the pose of ‘submission and stupidity’ can constitute a useful tactic (Scott, 1985:37). Residents maintained and feigned their own ignorance and fed that of their evictors in order to delay – confirming that ‘not acting has value’ (Bernstein, 1998:15). As a resident in Qasmiye noted: ‘We cannot make calls and connections until we have serious material documents that indicate the time period we have to leave, for instance.’²¹ This also implies that as long as the residents do *not* have this information and documentation, as long as they remain ignorant, they cannot be expected to act. What is more, as long as the authorities do not have certain information, they too cannot act (Gupta, 2012; Hull, 2012). If decision letters create their ‘own reality,’ ignoring these letters signals a refusal of this reality (Cowan, 2004:954). Keeping matters oral, and thereby ‘transitory and potentially more open to corruption and contradiction’ as long as possible then becomes imperative (Gupta, 2012:200). Bearing in mind similar examples discussed by Hull (2012:204), it is in this light that the physical resistance of Shabriha’s residents against the marking and measuring of affected buildings by CDR engineers and their apprehension of statistics should be seen. As Scott

(2009:229) explains, what is threatening to people is often not so much the ‘officials themselves as the paper documents – land titles, tax lists, population records – through which the officials seem to rule.’

Ignorance as strategic replication of institutional ambiguity

The above-described ignorance – both real, deliberately upheld, and pretense – on behalf of the Palestinian residents of the gatherings is often discussed as a symptom of the threat they supposedly present to the Lebanese state and nation. It fits the dominant Lebanese discourse of the Palestinians and their camps as sovereignty-undermining (Czajka, 2012; Meier, 2010). Lebanese authorities present residents’ ignorance as ‘disruptive’ and use it to fuel stereotypes of Palestinian refugees as ‘either hapless or unruly, painting them as patently unable to conform to the projects that have been formulated for [the public] good or as dangerous and criminal’ (Dunn and Cons, 2014:104; see also Cowan, 2004:929). The space of the gatherings is thus central in proclaiming moral deviance (Gieryn, 2000:479) and denigrating resistance (Scott, 1985:301).

What I will demonstrate below, however, is that, rather than going against the sovereignty claimed by the Lebanese state, the strategic ignorance of the gatherings’ residents in fact replicates the implicit policies of the Lebanese state. In many ways, residents are ‘forced to commit [...] the slew of transgressions’ they are accused of (Dunn and Cons, 2014:101). The institutional ambiguity effused on the gatherings, characterized by uncertainty regarding rights, mandates and responsibilities, lies at the root of the gatherings’ eviction problems. Residents invoke and reinforce this ambiguity as a protection mechanism – implicitly reasoning that as long as the situation remains vague, decisive action (which will be to their detriment) might be postponed. Thus, to some extent the very uncertainty that generates the residents’ ‘permanent state of anger and anxiety’ is used by them to delay the certainty of eviction (Williams, 2011:30).

The institutional ambiguity to which the gatherings are subjected, and which residents replicate through their ‘ignorance,’ has various manifestations. These all demonstrate how the institutional marginalization of particular spaces can spur collective action to avoid ‘loss of place’ and how deliberate ignorance can be part of such collective action (Gieryn, 2000:481-2). First, the gatherings fall outside UNRWA’s territory-based mandate and the Lebanese state’s citizenship-based mandate. They are also excluded from the Cairo Agreement and are illegally located on Lebanese land. As such, they are excluded from all forms of legal, formal and official governance in Lebanon. This extra-legality is part of what the gatherings’ residents evoke when they play ignorant and make the Lebanese state ignorant. Indeed, Scott (1990:199) reminds us, infrapolitics is particularly ‘well-suited to subjects who have no political rights.’ Palestinians strongly feel that they have little to expect from ‘the law’ (Rasul, 2013:6). In a focus group in Shabriha, participants stated:

We live in a situation of chaos. No one is ruling on the ground, everyone has their own laws that they apply according to their benefits. No one cares for the people; they are living; they are suffering; this is not important for them [the authorities]. You are in Lebanon and you must know this – we’re in the jungle, not in a state. [...] We have no court, we have no law and we have no state.²²

Being excluded from the rule of law, residents necessarily put their faith in the rule of precedents. People know that by steadfastly sticking to ‘quiet non-compliance’ and threatening with ‘on-the-spot resistance’ their presence on the ground is hard to reverse (Bayat, 1997:54; Hull, 2012:23). The informality and illegality that characterizes much of the response of the gatherings’ residents to the evictions, then, ‘is not an essential preference,’ but rather an ‘alternative to the constraints of formal structures,’ or, in this case, the exclusion of the gatherings from such formal structures (Bayat, 1997:60).

The lack of any indisputable authority in the gatherings, and the related ‘diffusion of agency,’ constitutes the second aspect of the gatherings’ institutional ambiguity that is mirrored in residents’ strategic ignorance (Hull, 2012:115). In the gatherings, neither UNRWA nor the Lebanese state nor Palestinian Popular Committees feature as undisputed representatives of the residing communities. With regard to the evictions, this means that residents are not informed about their fate (and cannot hold anyone accountable for this disinformation either). In the case of Shabriha, the CDR approached the municipality, which is the official landowner, and assumed the municipality would inform the residents. The municipality, however, hardly communicated about the eviction process with the Palestinian residents, whom it regarded bothersome squatters. A range of other actors, including Shabriha’s *mukhtar* and several NGOs, sought to fill this position of representative but this only generated more confusion about who spoke for the residents. In the end, a CDR project manager said the residents

Didn’t get any letter or anything; we see them in the field when we pass by. We asked the mayor what they were doing there and he told us that they live there illegally. There is no communication with them, not official and not unofficial. We saw them and we know there is a problem, but legally there is no relation between us and them.²³

Indeed, residents claimed they were never actually informed that their houses were included in the highway plot. Instead, they say they heard this through other channels and then suddenly found engineers painting large red numbers on their houses. The lack of a clearly designated responsibility for the gatherings thus explains much of the ambiguity that the residents replicate: if no one represents them, namely, they cannot be addressed and their lack of registration and compliance is hard to penalize. Legal experts of an NGO following the eviction case in Qasmiye explained that they were careful not to harm these ‘coping mechanisms that are based on discretion and not making noise.’²⁴ They added ‘we could have all the information that you’re asking for, but we don’t want to have it – for their sake.’

Institutional ambiguity is not only related to the gatherings’ informal status and concomitant lack of an undisputed representative. A third aspect is the politicization of the gatherings’ tenure situation. On the one hand, Lebanese authorities cast the Palestinian presence in Lebanon in terms of the polarized debate revolving around ‘settlement’ versus ‘return.’ The physical presence of the refugees and the particular conditions of their shelter – as concrete manifestations of either temporariness, and dedication to return, or permanence, and surrender to ‘settlement’ – have consequently become particularly politically laden. While residents indicated they resent this politicization, they have nevertheless come to embrace it. When they address Lebanese politicians

in order to freeze court cases, residents stave their requests with specifically political arguments to drive home the ‘political costs of expropriation policies’ (Hull, 2012:207). They play on the knowledge that displacing Palestinian refugees, already burdened by a history of forced expulsion, is a thorny issue for Lebanese politicians (Sanyal, 2013:568; Williams, 2011:34). Residents actively incited such sensitivities through the media and, according to the landowner, inhabitants of Qasmiye publicly accused her of ‘repeating the Palestinian *Nakba*.’²⁵

I argue that the above-described institutional ambiguity to which Lebanese authorities subject Palestinians in Lebanon, and specifically those in the gatherings, is deliberately constructed and maintained. Institutional ambiguity is not, I propose, an inevitable consequence of refugeeness, but rather the purposeful result of the absence of any state policy beyond repression (Klaus, 2000:140; Ramakrishnan, 2014:757). This replicates Ismail’s (2006:168) observations for Cairo’s informal settlements where many residents were equally convinced that ‘the state did not want them conscious and was actively undermining their ability to think critically by enmeshing them in daily struggles for survival.’

For Palestinians living in the gatherings this is especially poignant. In at least half of my interviews with local Lebanese state representatives, they were ignorant – or pretended to be ignorant – about the gatherings, thereby reproducing the image of Lebanon’s Palestinian spaces as ‘impenetrable and closed, unknowable, foreign’ (Ramadan, 2009a:157). Officials that I spoke with in Sur, for instance, said they were not even aware of the fact that there was a Palestinian gathering in Shabriha. A representative of an NGO working with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon said: ‘Many people at the municipality don’t have a clue about the gatherings; there is no representation or exchange.’²⁶ This not-knowing, however, is often intentional. A mayor from the region told me: ‘Don’t tell me how things are arranged [in Shabriha gathering]; I don’t want to know!’²⁷ Another mayor similarly advised me to ‘not get into this; to only dig on the surface.’²⁸

The institutional ambiguity to which the Palestinians in the gatherings are subject, thus, is the result of a deliberate ‘no-policy-policy’ on the side of the Lebanese government (Nassar, 2014). Several responses are possible in the face of such imposed ambiguity. Actors can lobby for regularization, the ‘hardening’ of institutions, which would increase predictability. Alternatively, they can employ what Cleaver (2002) calls ‘situational adjustment:’ the exploitation of the ‘soft’ status of institutions. Where, as in the gatherings, people have no official representative, few socio-economic assets and little political clout, producing regularization is not within their ability. Thus, situational adjustment becomes the default response to threats. The Lebanese ‘policy vacuum’ regarding the gatherings can partly be understood as a manifestation of deliberate ‘nonroutine and unpredictable’ rule which is a form of ‘despotic power’ (Ismail, 2006:xxiv).²⁹ As a member of Qasmiye’s Popular Committee lamented: ‘We don’t know what might happen even tomorrow; we live on a day-by-day basis.’³⁰ This reveals how the uncertainty produced by the residents of Shabriha and Qasmiye as a defense mechanism against eviction is generated by the uncertainty they themselves are subjected to by authorities. A Palestinian youth leader surmised: ‘We’re normalizing the abnormal. I think this is what one calls a negative coping mechanism.’³¹

Institutional ambiguity and strategic ignorance: who benefits how?

For residents, situational adjustment has so far served as a last resort to delay eviction, underwriting that ‘ignorance is not simply a resource for those wielding political power’ (McGoey, 2012a:9). The inhabitants of Qasmiye and Shabriha have utilized ignorance as a measure of last resort to protect the only living space that has been left for them after generations of legal marginalization in Lebanon succeeded forced expulsion from Palestine. The large majority of the people now living in the gatherings have been born there. They cannot relocate to the official camps, which are infamously overcrowded and have not been allowed to geographically expand since the 1950s (Martin, 2011:101). They are, since 2001, allowed to own neither land (on which they might build) nor real estate (Knudsen, 2007:12). Their legal discrimination on the labor market, moreover, makes it unlikely for most of the residents of the gatherings, two thirds of which lives under the poverty line (Chabaan, 2014:59), to earn the money needed to pay Lebanon’s high rents (DRC, 2005:46).

Temporary gains of ignorance should thus not be overstated. As Slater (2012:951) notes, in the long run they will almost always have disturbing consequences ‘for those living at the bottom of the class structure’ (see also Scott, 1985:299).³² The stalling generated through politicization of the eviction cases, for instance, ultimately only reinforces the instability and uncertainty of the residents’ daily life. A communal leader told me: ‘They stopped it; it was postponed. But we didn’t solve anything, it’s just suspended...’³³ Reflecting on the volatile relations between the PLO and Amal, someone from Qasmiye who preferred to stay anonymous worried: ‘Politics controls everything here. Now he [Berri] helps us and our relation with him is very good. But if there is a change in the situation or his opinion, this stops. Before, they were killing us!’³⁴

While residents in Qasmiye have depicted private landowners as the main villains, they cannot be said to have benefitted from the situation either. Landowners are left with unimplementable court orders and land they cannot use or sell but do pay taxes on. In the end, it is neither the landowners nor the residents that benefit from the status quo of institutional ambiguity. Rather, it is the Lebanese and Palestinian politicians that have claimed gatekeeper functions in the situational adjustment strategies of the residents that have profited from the situation (Stel, 2016).³⁵

Lebanese political parties, which in Lebanon’s political structure de facto hold sway over officially ‘neutral’ state agencies (Stel, 2015b), benefit from the institutional ambiguity in the gatherings because a more formal position of the Palestinian residents and their representatives would sideline them as intermediaries to the state. Lebanese leaders are often said to covet the allegiance of Palestinian armed groups with an eye to the country’s unstable political situation (Stel, 2015b:85). In addition, some Palestinians have received Lebanese citizenship and their votes can be relevant to local electoral dynamics (Stel, 2015c). Palestinian leaders also depend on the current institutional ambiguity to legitimize their undemocratic and widely unpopular rule over the Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon (Richter-Devroe, 2013; Hanafi and Long, 2010; see Ramadan, 2009b:673 for a poignant example). Had the affected residents had a formal status as either citizens or residents, the Palestinian parties might have lost much of their relevance for

residents as gatekeepers to the state (Stel, 2015b and 2016). Indeed, ‘the tacit complicity between institutional stakeholders on the Palestinian political scene and the Lebanese government in maintaining the status quo’ (Allan, 2014:203) means that insecurity and ambiguity are reinforced ‘by the very Palestinians who are supposed to protect their communities’ (Martin, 2011:238).

At least as important as the interests of Lebanese and Palestinian politicians in the current status quo of ambiguity, is the institutional entrenchment of this ambiguity by the various organizations of the Lebanese state. The contested land situation of the gatherings at first glance does not benefit the state. In Shabriha, the municipality of Abasiye has been unable to use parts of its most attractive land and the CDR faces serious obstacles in realizing important infrastructure projects. Yet, ultimately, the gatherings’ current institutional ambiguity is advantageous to the Lebanese state (Nassar, 2014). It enables the Lebanese government to disregard even the few obligations it has under the rare international conventions (such as the 1965 Casablanca Protocol) it acceded to (Knudsen, 2007:15). The Lebanese state faces an enormous financial deficit and grapples with capacity problems. In combination with the political sensitivity of the ‘Palestinian issue,’ this is a major incentive to try and avoid rather than address the needs of Palestinian refugees in the gatherings. In short, maintaining ambiguity means not having to deal with and invest in the gatherings.

Echoing the opening quote of this article, a Palestinian analyst explained that the situation in the gatherings is vague, because ‘it is intended to be vague! [...] The Lebanese state doesn’t want any formal responsibility; this is the heart of the matter.’³⁶ The gatherings were never part of the Cairo Agreement. There is thus no legal impediment to prevent the Lebanese authorities from incorporating them into their governance. Yet, they do not – because maintaining ambiguity about the political and juridical status of the gatherings relieves them from having to take the responsibility for these spaces (Martin, 2011:181). This interpretation resonates with Wedeen’s (2008:151) thesis that ‘spaces of disorder’ can paradoxically function as ‘a mode of reproducing rule.’ It establishes ambiguity as a form of political subordination that stems from the creation of ‘a façade of unpredictability’ (Ramakrishnan, 2014:757, 759).

Towards a political geography of agnology: aleatory sovereignty in sensitive spaces

As Proctor (2008:19) marvels, some spaces ‘have been erased from maps or never drawn in.’ While featuring on geographical maps, Lebanon’s Palestinian gatherings have never been drawn into the maps that delineate responsibilities and rights and this renders them ambiguous and vulnerable. Thus, from a conceptual perspective at least, the project of mapping and conceptualizing power within and across such spaces is particularly urgent (Dunn and Cons, 2014:106). The above analysis of the politics of uncertainty that entrenches institutional ambiguity in Shabriha and Qasmiye – which culminated in the threats of eviction – suggests that the strategic making and unmaking of ignorance are of key importance in such mapping and conceptualization.

Spatial governmentality has been concerned with studying how government, sovereignty and discipline operate through space. In this approach, camps are often theorized with reference to Agamben's 'spaces of exception,' zones in which refugees are degenerated to 'bare life' because the sovereign has placed them outside regular governance (Gupta, 2012:6-7; Martin, 2011). This reading has also been dominant with regard to (non-refugee) informal settlements (Bayat, 1997; Fawaz and Peillen, 2003; Ismail, 2006). The Agambenian framework tells us a lot about the significance of spaces of exception for our understanding of modern sovereignty. However, it primarily engages with the existence of such spaces and has less interest in the dynamics inside them. As such, as Dunn and Cons (2014:93) reveal, it ultimately fails to explain how these places actually work (see also Sanyal, 2011). This is the case precisely because 'the notion of a space of exception is grounded in an absolute certainty that belies the anxiety and confusion' that characterize many 'exceptional spaces' – such as camps, borderlands and informal settlements (Dunn and Cons, 2014:94) The notion of the state of exception does not deny the omnipresence of ambiguity in refugee spaces, but seems primarily interested in the ostensibly unequivocal dichotomy between norm and exception that undercuts a 'pluricentered, multileveled, and decentralized' conception of power (Gupta, 2012:17-18). If we are to engage explicitly with the idea of ambiguity, arguably the core feature of such spaces (Dunn and Cons, 2014:95), therefore, Dunn and Cons' (2014:93) notion of 'sensitive spaces' offers a more applicable analytical instrument.

The concept of 'sensitive spaces' was specifically honed to understand 'spaces characterized by multiple modes of power and conflicting claims to sovereign control,' such as the gatherings. The pervasive uncertainty, unpredictability and ambiguity that determine sensitive spaces brings them squarely into the realm of agnotology, because, as evidenced by the cases discussed above, this ignorance is often deliberate more than inevitable, a construct rather than a given. Knowledge generation projects are not simply per definition doomed to fail in the complexity of sensitive spaces, as Dunn and Cons (2014:96) suggest. Instead, they are often actively sabotaged by both sovereigns and subjects. Hence, it is in combining the more structural analysis implicit in Dunn and Cons' notion of aleatory sovereignty with the relatively agency-oriented perspective of agnotology that the full implications of ignorance and ambiguity in the gatherings (and similar spaces) is brought to the fore.

Dunn and Cons stipulate that sensitive spaces are ambiguous because such spaces are governed by what they call 'aleatory sovereignty.' Aleatory sovereignty exists at the 'conjunction of multiple forms of power' and 'results in outcomes that are unpredictable and appear to happen by chance' (Dunn and Cons, 2014:102). In sensitive spaces, 'there are so many interwoven projects, logics, goals, and anxieties of rule operating at once that it is impossible for any one person to understand and account for them at any given moment' (Dunn and Cons, 2014:102). This framework assumes that, in sensitive spaces, excessive 'projects of rule' implemented by the governing inexorably result in dramatic complexity and unintended results. This, in turn, necessitates the governed to act in informal and even illegal ways and, cyclically, eventually results in new and even more elaborate projects to establish control (Dunn and Cons, 2014:2-3).

While my case-studies corroborate much of this vicious cycle of uncertainty, one potential point of contention surfaces. Dunn and Cons (2014:2-3), in the instances of regulatory pluralism they focus on, assume that the unsanctioned actions of residents are ‘corrosive to carefully laid plans to establish power within or over such zones since they introduce action beyond sovereign control.’ For the instances of regulatory deficit that the gatherings represent, however, I suggest that uncertainty and institutional ambiguity might be an intended rather than an unintended consequence of authorities’ projects of rule; that the maintenance of such unpredictability and ambiguity might be an instrument of rule itself. The incongruity between institutional ambiguity and ‘a clear plan to establish sovereignty’ is then misleading because the ambiguity itself is part of the attempt to enact sovereignty (Dunn and Cons, 2014:103; see also Nassar, 2014:21). This also means that residents’ replication of this ambiguity through their ignoring and stalling tactics might reinforce rather than corrode state power. In the Palestinian gatherings of Shabriha and Qasmiye, authorities and would-be sovereigns may indeed be aggravated by the ‘constant transgression’ of the gatherings’ residents, which they cast as a threat to ‘territorial and other forms of sovereign control’ (Dunn and Cons, 2014:102). Yet the transgression is, in these cases at least, a response not to these authorities’ attempts to regularize or formalize but, conversely, to the absence of such attempts and the resultant protracted irregularity and informality. As Hull (2012:166, 248) has shown, in many cases ‘illegibility and opacity have been produced by the very instruments of legibility’ which means that ‘state control can be extended not only through specification, but through ambiguity.’

Such rule through, rather than despite, ambiguity resonates with Martin’s understanding of ‘potentiality.’ Martin explores the Lebanese state’s technologies of sovereignty and control vis-à-vis the country’s official refugee camps. She suggests that the very absence of the Lebanese state from Palestinian spaces can be read as ‘the manifestation of the sovereign’s *potenza*: a potentiality to-act or not-to-act, to-control or not-to-control’ (Martin, 2011:195; see also Ramadan, 2009a:158). It is in renouncing responsibility but embracing sanctioning that Lebanese authorities make institutional ambiguity work for them. Territoriality and land play an existential role in this. Now that ‘uncertainty over the status of the land has become the rule,’ the Lebanese government is in a situation where it could eliminate the gatherings without legal consequences (Martin, 2011:149). Potentiality explicates how ‘not-to-be and not-to-act’ can, in such contexts, be forms of control and power and abandoning direct ‘disciplinary techniques focusing on space and enclosure’ are not always an end of engagement, but can be merely another manifestation of it (Minca, 2005:409 in Martin, 2011:183).

If we try, as Dunn and Cons (2014:105) urge us, to move away ‘from the abstractions of juridical philosophy and towards the space of lived practice’ we have to account for not merely the structural aspects of the ambiguity of these spaces, but also the agency underlying it. Where Dunn and Cons (2014:102) find that actors operating in sensitive spaces ‘cannot know everything about how and why the other people in sensitive space act,’³⁷ the agnotology lens I have adopted in my analysis above suggests that actors also *will not want* to know. Rather than assuming that the ‘landscape’ of unpredictability is an inevitable nuisance or liability ‘with which both the governed and the

governing must contend,' we need to recognize that the governing often have a stake in maintaining the status quo ruled by ambiguity which the coping mechanisms of the governed often replicate and thereby reinforce (Dunn and Cons, 2014:102).

This has repercussions beyond the Palestinian gatherings. Martin (2011:148-9) and Ramadan (2009a) show that official Palestinian camps face increasingly ambiguous land situations as well. And the multitude of informal camps hosting Syrian refugees is subjected to similar logics (Nassar, 2014). Beyond the Lebanese context, other protracted refugee populations and inhabitants of informal settlements can be expected to face comparable situations (Bayat, 1997:5; Fawaz and Peillen, 2003:7-8; Gupta, 2012; Hull, 2012; Ismail, 2006:xviii; Sanyal, 2011:885, 2013:569; Scott 1985 and 1990).

My agnotological reflections on sensitive spaces have implications for our understanding of agency too. Over the last decade, scholars have moved from seeing refugees predominantly as victims and recipients towards considering them active political agents (Richter-Devroe, 2013:995; Sanyal, 2011, 2013). This has been a much needed paradigm shift but one, my findings suggest, whose repercussions are not always self-evident. As Scott (1985:29-30) himself cautions, the weapons of the weak should not be romanticized. The defiance of building regulations and appropriation of private lands practiced by residents in Shabriha and Qasmiye can be championed as a form resistance and a claim for redistribution (Bayat, 1995:56). But the gathering's recourse to informality, politicization and exceptionality simultaneously suggests that Qasmiye's residents are working around, or even with, the foundations of domination rather than shaking them (Ismail, 2006:xxiii). This should remind us that 'the parameters of resistance are also set, in part, by the institutions of oppression' (Scott, 1985:299). Many of the residents' genuinely inventive and at first sight effective coping mechanisms ultimately buttress the exceptionalism and ambiguity that caused their predicaments in the first place (Scott, 1985:29), resulting in what Ismail (2006:xxxv) calls 'the mutual ensnarement of rulers and ruled.'³⁸

Spatializing agnotology helps to explicate this ensnarement, because it elucidates how spaces such as the gatherings both make and are made by deliberate forms of ignorance. Insecurity, uncertainty and ambiguity are produced in and on the gatherings and have come to define them. Space, in the gatherings, 'is not merely a setting or backdrop,' but 'a force with detectable and independent effects on social life,' here the production of ignorance and ambiguity (Gieryn, 2000:466). My case-studies have evidenced this by amplifying the structuralist political geography notions of (sensitive) space and (aleatory) governance with the more agency-oriented agnotology framework. This contributes to furthering the field of agnotology because it casts ignorance as putatively spatial and partially intentional and thereby renders it ethnographically accessible (Croissant, 2014:4; Dunn and Cons, 2014:97; Ramakrishnan, 2014:757). It is, after all, the culmination of geographically situated microgeographies of exclusion, dispossession and uncertainty that make up the macrogeographies of ignorance that scholars, practitioners and policy-makers grapple with (Jeffrey et al., 2012:1258-9; see also Gupta, 2012:69).

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ENDNOTES

¹ Before the influx of Syrian refugees.

² *Nakba* means ‘catastrophe’ in Arabic and refers to the forced expulsion of Palestinians from their lands by Israeli militias in the process of the creation of the state of Israel.

³ The Cairo Agreement was signed between the PLO and the Lebanese army in 1968. It sanctioned the PLO’s armed presence inside the camps and forbade Lebanese state institutions to enter them (Czajka, 2012:240). The Agreement was abrogated in 1987 but continues to be observed in practice (Ramadan, 2009a:158).

⁴ Numbers are contested: Beer (2011:11) mentions 40,000 (ten percent of all Lebanon’s Palestinians); Rasul (2013:4) 103,000 (25 percent). Differences can be attributed to the in/exclusion of ‘adjacent areas’ (illegal extensions of the official camps – see Hilal (2010)) and Palestinian refugees from Syria. Chabaan (2014:13) stipulates that the gatherings together host 140,000 refugees (35 percent) including 30,000 Syrian refugees.

⁵ *Mukhtars* are sub-municipal government authorities tasked with administrative and social responsibilities on a neighborhood or village-level.

⁶ This is not to disregard the destruction and dismantling of several of the official camps (Tell al-Zaatar, Jisr al-Basha and Nabatiye) or the invasion of others (Nahr al-Bared); it is to suggest that, overall, eviction is currently less likely in the camps than in the gatherings.

⁷ Shabriha has about 4,155 inhabitants (Chabaan, 2014:109). Qasmiye hosts approximately 5,000 people, making it Lebanon’s largest gathering (Rasul, 2013:12).

The cases on which I draw here have been described in more empirical detail in previous papers (see Stel (2013a/b and 2014) for Shabriha and Stel (2015a) for Qasmiye).

⁸ 17 July 2013.

⁹ Sheikh, 11 April 2013.

¹⁰ Palestinian NGO, 21 June 2013.

¹¹ 28 May 2013.

¹² 23 October 2014.

¹³ 21 October 2014.

¹⁴ Based on my own assessment and DRC (2005:iii), I estimate the affected houses at around fifty.

¹⁵ Resident, 11 July 2014.

¹⁶ Communal leader, 16 July 2014.

¹⁷ 10 April 2013.

¹⁸ Contrasting infrapolitics with institutionalized politics, Scott (1985:33) sees the latter as ‘formal, overt, concerned with systematic, de jure change’ and the former as ‘informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate de facto gains.’

¹⁹ I received the court proceedings through a legal aid worker from UNRWA. They were translated from Arabic by my research assistant.

²⁰ 17 October 2014.

²¹ 1 May 2013.

²² 14 June 2013.

²³ 3 July 2013.

²⁴ 14 August 2014.

²⁵ 17 October 2014.

²⁶ 13 September 2012.

²⁷ 11 April 2013.

²⁸ 15 July 2014.

²⁹ LPDC analyst, 28 May 2013.

³⁰ 2 September 2014.

³¹ 6 July 2014.

³² The nature of academia as a knowledge-generating business of course demands a reflection of the role of the researcher in ‘revealing’ ignorance. Where ignorance is both a repression strategy and a coping mechanism, however, it is hard to determine whether exposing it is harmful. As I believe that the institutional ambiguity of the gatherings ultimately benefits authorities more than residents, whom I see as rightfully resisting the gatherings’ institutional marginalization rather than as profiteers, I am confident that my disclosure of ignorance in the cases of Qasmiye and Shabriha is not unethical.

³³ 16 July 2014.

³⁴ 2 September 2014. He refers to the War of the Camps (1985-1987), a particular vicious phase in the Civil War during which Amal laid siege to several Palestinian spaces.

³⁵ Although my case-studies have Lebanese and Palestinian actors as main protagonists, the ambiguity described in this article is not a solely Lebanese-Palestinian affair. The developments described are evidently the consequence of the *Nakba* which was enabled by the Sykes-Picot Agreement and Balfour Declaration.

³⁶ 6 June 2013.

³⁷ My emphasis.

³⁸ Scott (1990:xii) recognizes this ensnarement as well when he posits that ‘short of actual rebellion, powerless groups have [...] a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances.’ For him, infrapolitics almost inevitably ‘imply, in their intention or meaning, an accommodation with the system of domination’ (Scott, 1985:292).