

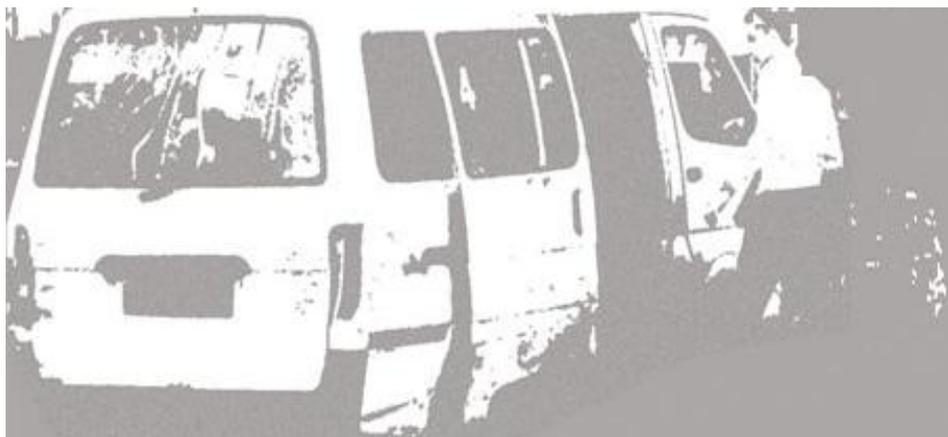
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**CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY THROUGH  
INFORMAL PRACTICES?  
THE CASE OF INFORMAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN BEIRUT**



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## **CLAIMING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY THROUGH INFORMAL PRACTICES?**

### **The case of informal public transport in Beirut**

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This paper tries to bring the notion of the Right to the City (RTTC) to the Lebanese context by attempting to study it differently in Beirut. Beirut is usually represented through images of war, state absence, and urban dysfunctionality, where informal practices are always described as symptoms of the failure of the urban. Born in western contexts, the RTTC was introduced as a concept by Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) to present a radical new paradigm that challenged the emerging social and political structures of capitalism, in the aim of reaching the Urban where inhabitants manage the space themselves, the practice that is referred to as “Urban Auto-Gestion”. The RTTC has been recurrent in urban social movements trying to foster participation and agency of urban population. The paper presents Informal public transport practices in Beirut, as an experimentation to study the RTTC differently, that might be bringing us back to its very radical nature. If we examine well the political dimension of the concept, could we try to think of daily practices that happen informally as a way to claim the RTTC? And the question here arises: could this be leading to a different form of RTTC, and by that transform the way we study the RTTC? The paper is a result of a thesis research project in the aim of obtaining a master of urban studies. The practice in Beirut presents intriguing results concerning the opening up of new spatial boundaries for people but moreover in relation to the dimension of Auto-Gestion of the activity.

**KEYWORDS:** Right to the city, Informal public transport, Critical Urban theory, Beirut.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the aim of contributing to critical urban theory, this paper tries to bring the notion of the Right to the City (RTTC) to the Lebanese context by attempting to study it differently. Born in western contexts, the RTTC has been used as a slogan and an agenda in urban social movements, yet the recurrence of such an agenda in a subtle way, away of organized social movements and among daily urban practices is something to explore. The paper therefore tries to point out the emergence of the RTTC without planning its adaptation but rather through insurgent informal practices of everyday life, informal public transport practices. The paper would like to bring forward the importance of new critical ways to study the RTTC, notably in Beirut.

Capital of Lebanon, the city lies at the centre of a very complex political-economic context (Gaspard, 2004). The political-economic system is strongly oligarchic and elitist, which entails henceforth minimal state intervention where urban development is left largely unchecked by the government (Krijnen, 2010). After the civil war (1975-2000), with social, political, and physical structures being almost completely destroyed (Fawaz, 2003), public service provision was highly unchecked by the government and an informal and illegal economy was increasingly establishing itself in Beirut as government policies continued to protect the dominant elites. Dense and congested urban areas surrounding the centre were being formed with the arrival of many low-income refugees and migrants and extending to the suburbs of the city (DGU 1973, Tabet 2001). The southern suburb of Beirut was a major arriving point and its neighbourhoods were marked with poor living. Much of the growth there occurred informally with an informal provision of public services. Hay el Selloum is an example of a neighbourhood where informal service provision was a necessity, and in this area the informal transport practice studied is situated. The mini bus operates there since 2000 (cf. Interview with managers). It is the unit of analysis, an informal public transport practice that reaches a group of people with common daily goals necessity and needs. It has identifiable boundaries in time and space as it is territorially delimited with a specific route and in a frequent manner of service, and has lasted for a certain period of time, giving it a developed and enduring character. The bus has a number assigned to it, the number four, that has been acquired after taking over the provision of public transport in the area by a privately operated bus. It accommodates from twelve to fifteen passengers

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. The Right to the City**

The right to the city (RTTC) is defined as an “exercise of power to reshape the process of urbanization (Harvey, 2003). It stands out as an important rallying cry and basis for transformative political mobilization (Brown, 2011:6) against the exclusionary process of city making that result in the disenfranchisement of a big part of the population. The RTTC as a slogan was first used for protests during the student uprisings in Paris in 1968 followed by national strikes of labour unions (Brown 2001:341). It was later used in organized social movements as a slogan and programme, especially in the last decade, against exclusion and inequality in the city. The concept has been very well advocated by

people who knew, read and understood (or not) Lefebvre. In a number of cases it was laid down as a rigid slogan and checklist, and has been completely institutionalized (Purcell 2013), especially through the creation of the RTTC charter in 2004, which led to its “dilution” (Kebrowski and Van Criekingen, 2015).

Following that, I propose that there should be an understanding of the radical dimension of the RTTC by looking beyond slogans and programmes and into daily practices. It can lead to finding the RTTC’s aspiration for the radical transformation of capitalist urban society rather than it being a tool and a slogan that works within the realm of this system. In fact, the original radical character of the concept has lately been revived (Harvey 2012: xii) with the idea of coming back to the roots of struggles as a critical method. At this level, daily practices become the reference, just as Lefebvre has first presented the concept (Harvey, 2012: xi); it is through them that the marginalized, excluded and deprived suffering the inequalities of the capitalist mode of development (Marcuse, 2009) act towards the Re-appropriation of the Urban (Purcell, 2003) and in this way challenge dominant and hegemonic paradigms of development, without having Lefebvre as a reference.

In light of this, it is crucial to understand the RTTC as an alternative restructuring of the existing urban condition in the aim of reaching what Lefebvre refers to as the Urban, wherein inhabitants manage the space themselves, the practice that is referred to as “Urban Auto-Gestion” (Purcell, 2013). The thorough examination of the concept of Auto-Gestion, translated as Self-Management, is what I use in this paper to grasp the radical dimension of the RTTC through the daily practices. For Lefebvre, the practical dimension of the RTTC would be, together with the end goal, the fact that inhabitants take over the aspects of their daily urban life and establish them away from technocracy and ruling class hegemony. Lefebvre views it as a form of direct democracy “born spontaneously out of the void in the social life that is created by the state” (Brenner & Elden, 2009:16), “a political project for the whole society—a radical re-imagination of that society” (Bogaert, 2014). Through these practices, inhabitants begin their struggle to become active, autonomous and political, reaching a wider array of Auto-Gestion (Purcell, 2003). With inhabitants taking over, the state transforms its role from a hegemonic force to a more inclusive power (Brenner, 2009). Insurgent actions of taking control, of self-providing and of self management, no matter how small and unorganized, must be perceived within this framework of urgent utopia that Lefebvre conceptualises, emanating from Auto-Gestion and towards Auto-Gestion. Through that, citizens rise up and claim urban space as an act of resistance and creation (Lefebvre, 1968). It is within this framework that I analysed, through this study, daily urban practices: informal public transport practices advanced by the people away of the state.

## **2.2. The social dimension of Public Transport**

Public transport can be, through providing accessibility and mobility of people in the city, providing a right to mobility and therefore an important component of the RTTC (Kaufmann, 2004). In fact, Lefebvre, in his work in 1968, valorises access for its own sake, which allows the right to urban life. When moving, people are able to participate in urban life, and people inhabiting in poor conditions will have the choice and ability to access other areas in the city with better opportunities (Access within today’s urban policies then obviously depends on spatial distribution of the population, socio-economic positions and spatial policies in relation to that). Access to public transport means access to “a critical

system in the city which enables people to appropriate the RTTC” (Levy, 2013). It is however important to go beyond the distributional aspect of transport practices which reduces the RTTC to the right to mobility and the right to accessibility. To provide a substantive analysis of these practices in respect to the RTTC, we should as well go beyond the fact that they are assuring a transport service in lack of its provision and their distributional aspect, but more over to reach different levels of analysis in order to study the implication of these practices on urban space and even further on urban life. We should look at their antagonist attitude itself, how they are advanced and who takes charge of them. In doing that we are closely examining what individuals do to use the space differently and therefore intervene in changing its structure. They can be promoting through these practices an appropriation of the space and henceforth promoting a different use of the city. We can then place them as urban projects initiated radically by people, and responding to short to medium term objectives with a larger long term political project: the appropriation of the city and urban life through Auto-Gestion. Mark Purcell’s interpretation of Lefebvre’s “Possible Urban” can help us to grasp more the relevance of such a study, since *“the first glimpse of spatial Auto-Gestion and the power of the people emerge in our society in forms of incipient practices. The practical project towards Lefebvre’s political and intellectual view of urban society is to look at those practices and examine them closely, and then try to extrapolate them to see what kind of world they can create”* (Purcell, 2013).

### **3. INFORMAL PRACTICES AS A TOOL FOR THE RTTC?**

In western contexts, the state acted as a primary representative of the public, which made it “synonymous with the public or the people” (Purcell, 2013: 4). The welfare state is born to actively manage capitalism “with an eye towards stability and material redistribution for social justice” (Purcell, 2013:4), committed to the public sphere by the general provision of public goods and services. If we associate the state to the formal realm where policies, strategies and planning take place, and the citizens to the informal one where daily urban life and urban practices take place, we can hypothesise an absence of informal practices advanced by the people to fill gaps of service provision. The weakening of the welfare state nowadays is of course leading to different outcomes, an interesting turf to explore. In the context of Beirut, we speak of a different urban political and economic reality: with an elitist government ignoring the interest if the public, there are major gaps encountered at the level of public service provision, which leads therefore to the insurgence of the informal practice. In regards to this, the RTTC in those two contexts, I argue, eventually takes a different form. While in western contexts the RTTC is present throughout many social movements trying to foster participation and agency of the urban population in the state policies, in Beirut, informal practices that are found in each corner of the city could be subtly holding the RTTC project within them. I argue therefore that looking for the RTTC sets of notions and goals through informal urban practices of daily life rather than organized social movements might bring us back to the very radical nature of the concept.

The notion of informality and that of the RTTC converge on many levels when questions of mobilization and resistance are tackled. The idea of engaging in activities that challenge the policies imposed by the state (and the lack thereof) is very popular among scholars and many seek to define agency, power and goals behind these practices (Bayat, 1997, Roy, 2005, Miraftab, 2009). In their recent works, some scholars state that engaging in urban informal activities is in itself a form of demand and realization of the RTTC, as informality

results in restructuring modes of everyday urban life. By providing their livelihood, people are having power, agency and control over the practices of their everyday life. It can subsequently be argued that the first step to take power and establish a detached apparatus of decision-making is to form a system away from the ruling technocratic one, challenging by that existing hierarchies and dictated modern planning preoccupied with functionality and obsessed with regularized visions (Miraftab, 2009). Informality can therefore be approximately seen as a system that goes hand in hand with Lefebvre's project. The "street politics" then (Bayat, 1997), created by informal practices, call for a closer look and a meticulous analysis in order to define what people are doing to meet the needs of their everyday life.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

One specific case of informal public transport in Beirut is scrutinized by doing a close case study analysis (see Gerring, 2002), in the aim of understanding its portrayal of values associated with the RTTC. This was made possible through a thick comprehensive examination and street level analysis based on participatory observations, ethnography and semi-structured interviews to closely observe the practices of drivers and passengers, and interact with them, in addition to mapping the activity, its geographical expression, and its position within the mobility structure of the areas- or lack thereof- where it takes place. The analysis of the findings will first unfold the details of the practice, the activity itself, and connect it to the right to mobility and then go beyond the physical and direct specifications of the practice shedding the light on the implication of the activity on a larger scale and on the urban space and experimenting with the notion of appropriation. Lastly, the interpretation will seek to highlight the bigger effects but also prospects of the practice, trying to underline the political side of it- or the lack thereof- taking us closer to Lefebvre's notions and concepts about the right to the city as a political program and the Possible Urban.

#### 5. CASE STUDY: INFORMAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT PRACTICE IN BEIRUT: AL VAN

According to the interviews with the managers of each starting point, there are more or less in total 200 mini vans operating on the route. The route has been set starting from command centre one. The Van operates on a specific route, "**Al Khat**"<sup>1</sup> that slightly changes in peak hours and heavy traffic time. Taking place nowadays from three different starting points, the Van drives all the way from the southern suburb of Beirut to the city centre, continuing to the western areas of Beirut. The departure points, "**Maw'af**" (Command centres)<sup>2</sup> of the bus are located in 3 places as illustrated on the map below (fig.

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<sup>1</sup> "**Al Khat**" (The route): The determined route on which the drivers operate. Drivers and passengers know it well. It is said: Do you work on the route ("al Khat")? Which means: are you a driver in the bus no. 4 activity?

<sup>2</sup> "**Maw'af**" Command Centre: The providers of the service name "parking" the area in which they assemble, organize and schedule the activity. It is where the buses park waiting for their turn and it is where they pay their daily fee to participate in the job. Since this place is a centre where the organization, guidance and monitoring take place and where the people in charge are located, I would like to call it "**Command Centre**". There are three command centres (represented on the map):

1). These three points are the places where each driver checks in before going on a “Na’leh”<sup>3</sup> (shift).

### 5.1. The passengers: Testing the right to mobility: The Van in Beirut as a mean to participate in urban life

Throughout the fieldwork, findings show the recurrence of themes of utility, efficiency and affordability of the service, in addition to its visibility and transparency for passengers.

Utility, together with affordability and efficiency, were the most recurrent themes, as most of the passengers confirmed throughout the interviews that the service is crucial for them and in many cases that they have no other alternative: *“there is no other way for me to get to work, if I take a taxi everyday I pay so much more money”* (employee in Hamra, male, 55 y.o). Another man, also living in Hay El Selloum, tells me, while travelling in the Van to visit his wife at the hospital in Hamra together with his three kids: *“In absence of the Van it would have been so hard to go to the hospital and take the kids to visit her everyday, thank God there is the Van”*. The idea of accessibility here is also related to the safety of women in public transport: women feel safer in the Van with other people instead of riding alone with a stranger in a car (the jitney service). The interviews showed that people are thankful for the bus and consider it very important and many of them explain that they have no other alternative to move around the city. They also explain that the bus is very affordable for them.

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- Command centre 1: “Al Arze”. It was the first and replaced the former bus (run by a private company)
  - Command Centre 2: “Al Jam’aa” which means university and it is at the entrance of the Lebanese University and mainly serves students
  - Command Centre 3: “Al Malak” named after the street where it is. It is the one that serves the people of the neighbourhood most (Furthest stop on the line)

<sup>3</sup> **“Na’leh” (Shift)**: When the driver goes from the command centre to the last stop in Hamra and back to the command centre (app. 10 km)



and know who to talk to when they have a problem, a complaint or when they lose something during a ride.

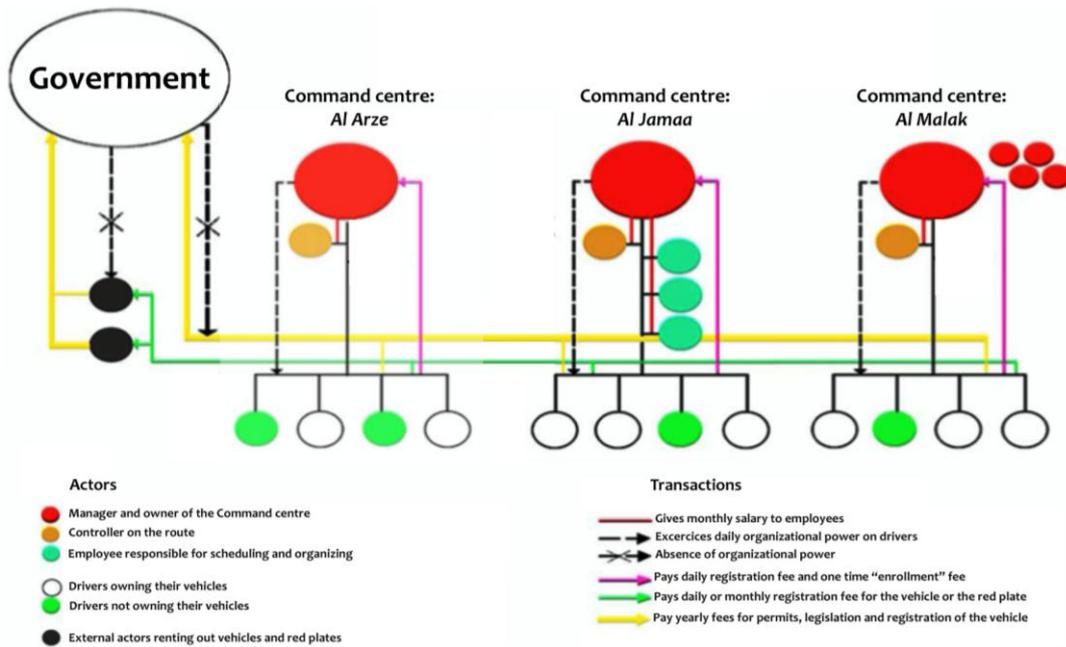
## **5.2. The supply side: The Van in Beirut: An organizational structure for a growing service**

At the other end, drivers have various stories to tell from their point of view as providers of the service. Not only drivers are involved in the provision, but there are also managers who are in charge of the activity, regulating it daily and hiring people to closely operate it.. Building on the fieldwork, I was able to draw a scheme of the practice and to deduce the role and duties as considered by the drivers, the managers and the employees, but also to draw a scheme of power relationships and structures in relation to the organization of the activity, the yield that the activity makes and where it is deployed.

The drivers of the Van in Beirut consider the practice as one providing them with a job without which they would not be able to sustain their daily needs. Many explain that they resorted to this “job” after getting retired, losing older jobs, or not finding jobs in their fields of expertise. Younger drivers consider it a first choice after finishing secondary school. In relation to the purpose of the practice, some drivers explain their dedication to servicing people by affirming that without it people would struggle to move in the city. They also affirm that it is a means for them to make money and create a flexible job that responds to their needs. Observations show that the social dimension of the practice is nevertheless expressed throughout the daily operation, even though drivers stop to pick up passengers in order to increase their yield. This dedication is more understood through the interviews conducted with the managers. They all affirm that the practice’s first objective is to serve people especially living in the southern suburbs, because without this mode they would not be able to reach the rest of the city. Undoubtedly the providers of the service tend to romanticize their practice and their dedication and it is probably the reason why the practice grew that much. Contrarily, young drivers who are on the route in the evening and at night firmly explain that they only want to make money. When asked about what they think of the organizational structure, drivers explain that they are very glad that this organization is put in place and confirm that without it the activity would not be successful. For them what the managers do is already in a way assuring the good conditions of their job and providing them with certain legitimacy in the city, despite the fact that they do not participate directly in the modelling of the activity.

In relation to the organizational structure of the activity, and while generally informal transport practices around the world have an internal organization that is held in a loose and horizontal way (Cervero, Golub, 2007), it is obvious that in the case of the Van number four there is a vertical organization with managers in charge and employees hired for monitoring the activity. Throughout this organization, competition is toned down between drivers and a better time-space distribution of the activity is guaranteed.

Figure 2: Organizational structure of the Van



Source: Author

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1. Beyond the daily practice: Towards a Right to the City project?

Understanding the practices of informal transport of the Van through the experiences of the passengers have allowed to test their distributional aspect on a daily basis and that leads to the formulation of the right to mobility as explained above. The practice does provide a right to mobility and accessibility to a considerable number of people by opening up new spatial boundaries and allowing people to use urban space beyond their confined living places. What can we understand when looking beyond the distributional aspect of the practice, questioning its implication on urban space and its political dimension?

#### 6.1.1. The transformation and appropriation of urban space?

To speak of appropriation following the work of Lefebvre one needs to examine the urban space closely and conduct a broader study about its transformation in relation to the informal transport practice. The accessibility of a group of population of defined areas in the city and their ability to reach other parts of the city conjures up the possibility of the production of new geographies for different uses. The research has focused on studying the practice itself without expanding it into studying the urban areas around this practice, which is a project long overdue. A typology of accessibility explained above throughout the movement of the passengers, their origins and their destinations can give a geography of accessibility and help us deduce that the practice opens up new spatial boundaries, but it does not give an explanation about the space accessed and its use. Lefebvre defines appropriation as "a spatial practice in which human nature has been modified in order to satisfy and expand human needs and possibilities" (Lefebvre 1968). It is applied on a space that outlives its original purpose, inducing different uses by its appropriators. If we try to extend the concept of appropriation to the spaces covered through the travel of the bus, we might be able to speak of a certain appropriation by existing. It might be then interesting to consider that the circulation of the bus on a defined line is a certain type of

legitimization of the practice that was once designated as an illegal one happening outside the realm of planning, announcing a certain form of appropriation throughout the city. Moreover, the visibility of the service has increased throughout the years and its affirmation in the space has been reinforced. The group of providers who initiated the activity, once illegal (in 2000- according to interviews with managers), have managed to establish their presence throughout the streets by travelling visibly but also in designated spaces where they have established the three command centres. The three centres are placed on land that would have otherwise been used for real estate development like every other land around it (according to interviews with managers). Furthermore, the Van has established along its route areas where it stops to pick up passengers, defined points in space that have become legitimately recognized and used by people. Could this also be a form of appropriation?

#### *6.1.2. Political meaning: Participation and Auto-gestion?*

If we look at the “engines” behind the practice, the supply side, we can try to understand a certain political dimension to it and associate it with a larger urban project. Following the association between informality and the Right to the city as a starting point, we can set a lens that defines these practices as ones that are foregrounded by people separately from ruling technocratic realms, establishing a certain agency of people in relation to public transport in the city. To get back to Lefebvre’s urban project, the long term RTTC project starts by setting out urban objectives in daily life with a political dimension that are short and medium term ones constituting the sphere of the wider urban programme (Lefebvre, 1968). This programme is set way in the future, an imagined programme transform urban life. But back to the short and medium terms objectives, those are defined in time and space, established to take place with a political dimension in front of authorities and proposed as an alternative for what is dictated by authorities. The practice is advanced by a group of people away of technocracy and formal and planning institutions, a first characteristic for Auto-Gestion. In establishing this practice and conducting it on the streets of the city, there is a certain challenge of existing configuration of power that determines planning processes and advancement of policies in the city.

Along these definitions, and by scrutinizing the aspirations of the providers of the service and their planning for future control over the city, it is possible to look at the informal public transport practice as a short or medium term project that could set the cornerstone of a bigger urban programme, the Possible Urban. Years ago, a public transport network has been implemented in Beirut, weakened later by the civil war then undertaken by the private sector. Today, another bus rapid transit project is since 2010 thought to be implemented in the metropolitan region of Beirut through public private initiatives. With the inability of the Lebanese government to implement this project, informal public transport keeps flourishing in different corners of the city (and the country). The Van number four has been particularly moving forward in its establishment in the city and its recognition as a fixed and efficient service by users and authorities. When asked about the starting of the practice, the manager explains that it had been thought as a practice advanced by the people for the people when private companies entered the line and tried to replace the public buses provided by the government. “*We didn’t want a private company to take over the service, it is a service for people*”, he claims, after explaining the creation of the syndicate for mini bus drivers in Lebanon in 2000. The practice has evolved with time, from starting with ten drivers to forming a whole network of drivers and managers and establishing the organizational scheme presented above, but also to plan future lines and

networks in Lebanon. He explains: “*It is our duty to organize these transport practices in order to guarantee better labour conditions for the drivers and a better service for the passengers. The aim is to get a service from the people to the people, but it can only succeed when done properly*”. The legitimization of the activity has been politically lobbied for, succeeding in establishing the practice in daily urban life. The providers of the service refer to their practice as a “right” that should be recognized by the state. This lobbying has allowed the registration of the activity in the transport sector and its legalisation: today the state provides permits to people who want to be part of the practice.

## **6.2. Avoiding romanticization**

The close examination of these practices have allowed me to present a number of conclusive remarks in relation to the set of theoretical notions I covered at the beginning. Beyond the right to mobility tested above, appropriation as a Lefebvrian concept is not achieved by these practices, despite the fact that the little extension of the concept can show forms of occupation of certain spaces in the city by the activity. However, it is important to think whether these practices can change the geography of the city. At first born out of the void, the practice extends much further to constitute a struggle and a cry for an established public service in the city. The Auto-gestion dimension is therefore strongly affirming itself. The Activism and autonomy define the providers of the service since the start but furthermore their future aspiration for taking over and their contributions in changing the way public transport is established in the city of Beirut.

Although it is important to present its positive side and its ability to grow with time to become a bigger project, it is crucial to state the limitations of this aspect of the practice in order to avoid romanticizing it. For instance, there is already a competition between the three command centres, wouldn't that stand as a big barrier for an Auto-Gestion project and replicate a capitalist market with competition over making the most profit? Additionally, we already see a vertical power; however a successful organizational structure, it might present some forms of labour exploitations and power exerted through coercion for example, announcing an internally divided system driven by profit.

On a final note, and back to the notion of the Possible Urban, the question remains: could these practices be seen as really transcending capitalist power structures? Or perhaps their existence is contributing, by granting the access to the people to existing capitalist spaces without diverting their nature, to another form of urban commodification of this space to benefit the city in its existing form?

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