**Bringing the state and political economy back in:**

**Consociationalism and crisis in Lebanon**

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**Abstract:**

Beirut’s 2015 garbage crisis provoked protests against unaccountable elites. Consociationalists consider such crises an external “load” on the system. I argue that consociation can actually cause crises by enabling elite rent-seeking. Drawing on Jessop and Poulantzas, I show that the consociational elite cartel “condenses” class interests into the Lebanese state. 1990s elite concord and inclusion of Gulf capital enabled rent creation through privatised garbage collection. Concord among rent-seeking elites made the state “agile”. In the run-up to 2015, a return to consociational “immobilism” prevented resolution of waste-management issues. State and political economy must be part of any assessment of consociationalism.

**Keywords:** consociationalism, Lebanon, Poulantzas, state theory, garbage, environment

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Lebanon’s consociation has come under numerous challenges, manifest at different institutional levels.[[1]](#footnote-1) Whilst the focus has often been upon difficulties in government formation, some of the worst instances of destabilization have been created at the local level, as they have highlighted the stagnation within governance. For several weeks in the summer of 2015, Beirut drowned in garbage after the main landfill serving the capital had to close because it was beyond capacity. The authorities had failed to provide an alternative in time for the closure. This led to a series of protests, in which demonstrators demanded accountability from Lebanon’s sectarian leaders and questioned the very legitimacy of the country’s consociational power-sharing (Abu-Rish, 2015). The 2015 crisis was a harbinger of subsequent crises: Water and electricity shortages, currency collapse, an inadequate Covid-19 response, and the explosion at Beirut port in August 2020. This article examines the 2015 garbage crisis as an indicator of the crisis of consociationalism and examines the implications of such crises for consociationalism, both theoretically and normatively

Consociational theory holds that rule by elite cartel is the best means of ensuring peace and democracy in “deeply divided” societies. In order to work successfully, the exogenous “load” on the power-sharing system must remain minimal: The political problems the consociational leaders need to deal with must not be overwhelming (Lijphart, 1969, p. 218; Lijphart, 2008, p. 51). A growing body of literature on Lebanon’s political economy questions this and instead identifies consociational power-sharing as a cause of poor public service delivery and corruption (Leenders, 2012; Salti & Chaaban, 2010; Salloukh, 2019; Mahmalat & Zoughaib, 2021). The literature on consociationalism in general and on Lebanon in particular treats the load as external to the analysis of power-sharing, or simply neglects to engage with socio-economic issues at all (Bogaards, 2019; Haddad, 2009; Nagle, 2016; Rosiny, 2015; Assi, 2016; Hamdan, 2012; Fakhoury, 2014; Hudson, 1976, p. 117; Hudson, 1997; Lijphart, 1969, pp. 217-219; Lijphart, 2008, p. 51). Where authors touch on political economy, the implications for consociational theory are not sufficiently elaborated (Makdisi & Marktanner, 2009; Nagle, 2009). It is this failure of the consociationalism literature to take account of political economy, which this article addresses.

I argue that the load is not external to consociation. The garbage crisis can be explained with reference to the political economy of garbage, namely rent-seeking through privatised waste collection: rule by consociational elite cartel enabled rent-seeking by those elites (see Salloukh in this volume). If we want to understand the garbage crisis, then, we need to look at the dynamics within this cartel. The identities of these elites and interests are not just shaped by sect – as consociational theory seems to posit – but also by class. Former militia leaders and Lebanese-born contractors from the Gulf dominated the consociational elite cartel and hence the postwar state. The Lebanese state has a major role in the Lebanese economy (Leenders, 2012; Salloukh, 2019) and is embedded in wider regional and global economy (Baumann, 2016; Hanieh, 2018). The merits of consociationalism as a proposal to ensure democracy in “deeply divided societies” cannot be evaluated without an understanding of its effects on state and political economy.

In the first section I trace how the literature on consociationalism in general, and of Lebanese consociationalism in particular, have treated political economy as an external load. I then draw on Jessop and Poulantzas’ work on the state to understand how class interests are “condensed” into the state through the consociational elite cartel, and how this state formulated a rent-based accumulation strategy (Poulantzas, 1973, p. 45; Poulantzas, 1978, pp. 123-160; Jessop, 2007, pp. 21-53). In the second section I explain my method. I construct a historical narrative of garbage collection in Beirut from the “critical juncture” of the 1990s to the crisis in 2015. The puzzle I address is why the state was “strong” in the 1990s, when garbage collection was successfully privatised, but “weak” in dealing with the long-term implications of decisions taken in the 1990s, leading to the crisis in 2015. This provides a plausibility probe for using Jessop and Poulantzas to analyse the consociational elite cartel. In the third section, I look at the privatisation of waste collection in Beirut in the 1990s as a form of rent-creation or postwar spoils in a quota or “allotment” system, referred to as *muhasasa*. The nature of rent-creation mechanisms was not simply driven by the dynamics of sectarian power-sharing but also the class identities of those within the elite cartel. Consociational power-sharing provided the framework for selecting who was allowed to “capture” which part of the state. Contrary to assumptions of consociational “immobilism”, elite concord actually made the state “agile”. The fourth section sets out how the crisis developed in 2015. The government and the private contractor provided insufficient capacity to landfill, recycle, compost, or incinerate it. Furthermore, the garbage issue thus became embroiled in wider constitutional and regional power-struggles after former prime minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in 2005. No one sectarian bloc was allowed to “capture” the parts of the state that were managing garbage and “immobilism” returned. Consociationalism was thus central to the failure to tackle the garbage crisis. A fifth section concludes.State and political economy need to be part of any assessment of the utility of consociationalism. The conclusions very briefly suggest implications of this finding for Lebanon’s current crises and for consociationalism elsewhere, especially Iraq.

**Reading Consociationalism in Lebanon**

Consociationalism promises stable democracy and peaceful coexistence in societies deeply divided by ethnicity, nationalism, or sectarianism. It is a means to protect minority groups de-facto excluded from political power based on ascriptive identities. In Lebanon, the consociational power-sharing agreement “was designed to cope with one problem above all others: Christian-Muslim hostility” (Hudson, 1976, p. 114). Consociationalists argue that it is impossible to overcome these “cleavages” through integration or transformation.Classical consociational theory therefore proposes accommodation among elites at the head of segmented social groups: “Consociational democracy means government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented culture into a stable democracy” (Lijphart, 1969, p. 216). This is achieved through grand coalition, cultural autonomy, proportionality, and minority veto (Lijphart, 1969; McGarry & O'Leary, 2007, p. 671; Lijphart, 2008, pp. 45-49).

Lijphart described the “essential characteristic of consociational democracy, not so much any particular institutional arrangement as the deliberate joint effort by the elites to stabilise the system” (Lijphart, 1969, p. 213). Furthermore, while leaders are elected, elites are “somewhat insulated from the electorate,” thus curtailing democracy (Dekmejian, 1978, p. 257; Lijphart, 1969, p. 214). More recently, advocates of consociationalism argued for “liberal consociation” to “allow citizens, and not just elites, to determine the trajectory of power-sharing” (McCulloch, 2014, p. 514; McGarry & O’Leary, 2006). In liberal consociation, there is power-sharing according to agreed electoral formulae – for instance all parties who achieve parliamentary seats above a certain threshold get to sit in the cabinet. There is no prior reference to ascriptive identities. Liberal consociation can intensify electoral competition, potentially preventing the emergency of “elite cartels” of the kind Lijphart proposed.

A look at the realities of liberal consociation suggests this promise is difficult to realise in practice. Iraq is regularly discussed as an example of liberal consociation (McGarry & O'Leary, 2007; Bogaards, 2021). Numerous commentators on Iraq – including the contributors to this special issue – lament the rule by unaccountable sectarian elites who engage in *muhasasa* – the politics of division of economic spoils within this elite (Dodge, 2019). Consociational theory also still needs to accept that there are cases of corporate consociation, where power is shared among representatives of pre-determined ascriptive groups – ethnicities, sects, nationalities, etc. Lebanon is an example of corporate consociation where informal agreement allocates the top positions of state according to sectarian identity: The president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister Sunni Muslim, and parliamentary speaker Shia Muslim. Given the persistence of political dynasties in Lebanon and the failure of non-sectarian civil society groups to score electoral success, it seems that the Lebanese elite cartel is alive and well (Khneisser, 2019; Deets, 2018; Deets & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2021). Some consociationalists still defend Lebanon’s corporate consociation as being preferable to no consociation at all (McGarry & O'Leary, 2007, p. p. 691). In short, there is an effort to move away from the Lijphartian elite cartel in the normative prescriptions of consociational theory but the practice of power-sharing – both liberal and corporate – still forces consociationalists to engage with the reality of such cartels.

Lijphart holds that three factors are strongly conducive to the establishment and maintenance of cooperation among elites in fragmented systems (Lijphart, 1969, pp. 217-219). The one that interests us here is a “low total ‘load’ on the decision-making apparatus”, in other words, the political problems that the consociational democracy needs to tackle must not be too big. Among “background factors” Lijphart identifies as favouring consociationalism (Lijphart, 2008, p. 51)is the condition that “socio-economic differences between groups are not high enough to lead to unrest”. Socio-economic issues and the political economy that cause them are external to the analysis of consociational theory. Moreover, socio-economic inequality only becomes interesting to consociational theory if it reinforces rather than cuts across ethnic, national, or sectarian cleavages (O'Leary, 1989, p. 574). Socio-economic issues are thus a mere epiphenomenon, while sectarian, ethnic, nationalist division is considered politics proper. This neglect of political economy makes it difficult to assess the ability of consociationalism to ensure democracy and peace. In Lebanon, in particular, consociational power sharing seems to be frequently buffeted by socio-economic crises. What if the dynamics of consociational governance themselves exacerbate socio-economic crises and income inequality?

Moreover, consociational theory’s contribution to debates on the state are framed in negative terms. In a fragmented political culture elite competition can create “centrifugal tendencies” that cause the state to disintegrate – with Lebanon as a prime example (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987, pp. 201-202). The only way to avoid state breakdown is elite autonomy as proposed by consociationalism, where elites “can bargain on behalf of ‘their’ communities without fearing that compromises will lead to their removal and the substitution of a new elite for the social group” (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987, p. 202). Boogards (in this special issue) argues that consociationalism seeks to ameliorate tension over the divisive question which ethnic group “owns the state” (Wimmer, 1997). Boogards as well as Dunleavy and O’Leary thus express a deep anxiety over state disintegration. This is a negative conception of the consociational state as a bulwark against state failure but lacks a positive vision of the capabilities of the state, for instance as an economic actor.

In order to bring political economy and consociationalism together, we need an ontology where “the economy” is not separable from the wider social and political world (Miliband, 2004, pp. 6-13; Polanyi, 2001). What we also need is a theory of the state which goes beyond disintegration and which explains the economic strategy of the consociational state. Jessop notes that state managers play a central role in formulating “accumulation strategies”, by which he means the “growth model” unifying different moments in the circuits of capital (Jessop, 1991; Jessop, 2002). Class is here conceptualised within the Marxist tradition as being based on capitalists’ exploitation and domination of others’ labour (Olin Wright, 2009). Importantly, a capitalist class constitutes not just at the national scale but also the regional and global ones, including the Middle East (Hanieh, 2018). For Jessop and Nicos Poulantzas the state is a terrain of struggle. Class struggles are “condensed” in the state and the state is thus also a site where such struggles can be “deciphered” (Poulantzas, 1973, p. 45; Poulantzas, 1978, pp. 123-160; Jessop, 2007, pp. 21-53). Looking at the elite cartel more closely enables us to see how it is a site for “condensing” class forces for formulating an accumulation strategy. All this happens in the “capitalist context” of a regional and global political economy (Block, 1981; Block, 1977). Furthermore, foreign capital can become “internal” to a domestic social formation and become “condensed” into the state (Poulantzas, 2008). Consociationalism is rule by elite cartel. Members of the elite cartel are not just sectarian leaders but also represent class interests, and are subject to constraints and opportunities of regional and global political economy when they formulate an accumulation strategy.

The consociationalism literature on Lebanon largely sidelines political economy. Lijphart includes Lebanon as one of the examples of successful consociation in the late 1960s. However, he cites Hudson’s warning that the deterioration of the socio-economic situation may “overload” the system (Lijphart, 1969, p. 219). And yet Lebanon’s political economy was no external load: This was the time when Lebanon was referred to as the “merchant republic”, where the same elite cartel that was shaping politics was also driving a laissez faire experiment that caused extreme wealth concentration and economic inequality (Nasr, 1978; Traboulsi, 2012; Gates, 1998). After independence in 1946, Lebanon acted as an entrepot for finance and trade for its neighbours, which imposed their increasingly restrictive economic policies. The elite cartel was therefore not simply a collection of wise communal leaders bargaining on behalf of their flock but also empowered a commercial-financial bourgeoisie and ensured the continuation of Lebanese laissez faire.

After the onset of civil war in 1975, some consociationalists almost completely ignored the economy in their explanations of civil war, focusing instead on demographic changes, Maronite unwillingness to adjust the power-sharing formula, and a turbulent regional environment (Dekmejian, 1978, pp. 259-261; Assi, 2016, pp. 53-54; Kerr, 2005). For Dekmejian, class polarisation does matter, but only because it was the “Muslim lower class” that was mobilised (Dekmejian, 1978, p. 260). This misses the “crisis of Lebanese capitalism” (Nasr, 1978): how capitalist agriculture led to rural crisis and migration to the cities. Migrants failed to be integrated into the urban service economy and formed a “misery belt” around Beirut. It was from this peripheral urban location that militias were recruited and where the first massacres of the war started.

By far the most thoughtful engagement of consociational theory with the problem of political economy and civil war comes from Michael Hudson. He argues that consociational power-sharing induced “immobilism, which made it impossible for the system to deal with socio-economic ‘modernisation’ - urbanisation, rising education, and political mobilisation (Hudson, 1976, p. 117; Hudson, 1988, p. 236). ”, Immobilism is seen as inherent in consociationalism (Horowitz, 2014). In Lebanon it arises from the veto given to the “troika” of Maronite president, Sunni prime minister, and Shia speaker of parliament who can all block policy. Hudson’s reference to immobilism still treats “modernisation” as an external load which elites simply failed to deal with. It does not recognise that the political economy that produced socio-economic inequality was not exogenous to the rule of an elite cartel, but the result of the very elite cartel pursuing their own economic interests at the expense of large sections of the Lebanese population.

Consociational power sharing was restored through the Ta’if agreement of 1989. Most of the literature largely ignores any socio-economic issues (Bogaards, 2019; Haddad, 2009; Nagle, 2016; Rosiny, 2015; Assi, 2016; Hamdan, 2012; Fakhoury, 2014; Hudson, 1997; Hudson, 1999; Rizkallah, 2017; Salamey, 2009; Salamey and Payne 2008). However, a growing literature on Lebanon’s postwar political economy suggests that consociational theory’s treatment of socio-economic issues as a mere external load is no longer tenable. Makdisi and Marktanner argue that consociational power-sharing is the main obstacle to a Lebanese state with the fiscal capacity to tackle industrialisation and inequality (Makdisi & Marktanner, 2009, p. 6). They offer no wider conclusion as to what this might mean for consociational theory and their findings have found little echo in the literature on consociationalism. Similarly, Leenders surveyed the division of “spoils” among Lebanon’s postwar elite, an “allotment” of rent referred to as *muhasasa* (Leenders, 2012). This happens through parcelling up the public sector (Salloukh, 2019) and key government agencies such as the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), or agencies for local development and for the internally displaced (Mahmalat & Zoughaib, 2021; Baumann, 2016). Welfare is distributed not according to need but along sectarian lines (Salti & Chaaban, 2010) and in support of electoral politics (Cammett, 2014; Baumann, 2012). The self-serving division of spoils was not sustainable and is now widely blamed for the current economic collapse by both academic commentators and international organisations (Baumann, 2019; World Bank, 2021; UN Human Rights Council - Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2022). If the elite cartel, which consociational power-sharing enables, is thus at the root of Lebanon’s current economic collapse, then consociational theory can no longer ignore political economy.

**Researching a Garbage Crisis**

A research question should be something that stimulates “indignation, annoyance, and irritation” when theory cannot explain a specific outcome (Geddes, cited in Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 86). The 2015 garbage protests do this with regard to consociational theory. The protests challenged the very legitimacy of the consociational elite cartel while the crisis itself was rooted in the dynamics of rent-seeking from within this elite cartel. This presents a problem for consociationalism, which considers socio-economic issues an external load. My starting point is the growing literature on political economy and the state in Lebanon, which suggests that the dynamics of consociational power-sharing have played a role in failures of public service delivery (Baumann, 2017; Leenders, 2012; Salloukh, 2019; Verdeil, 2018). I contribute to this literature by looking at the case study of the 2015 garbage crisis. While others have written about social mobilisation and the electoral aftermath of the garbage crisis (Deets, 2018; Deets & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2021; Khneisser, 2019), the political economy of the crisis has been touched upon but has not been examined in depth (Abu-Rish, 2015). My theoretical contribution is to use this case study to critique consociational theory’s neglect of political economy. In order to do so, I construct a historical narrative stretching from the 1990s, when postwar garbage collection was put in place, to the 2015 crisis.

Historical narrative requires “taking good snapshots at a series of specific moments” in order to “characterize key steps in the process, which in turn permits good analysis of change and sequence” (Collier, 2011, p. 824). The puzzle arises out of the initial success and subsequent failure of garbage collection in Beirut. Garbage collection improved markedly in the 1990s compared to the civil war. While this success was always precarious, at least Beirut experienced no major garbage crises on the scale of the weeks-long pile-up in 2015. Why was garbage collection working reasonably well in the 1990s but broke down in 2015? I regard postwar reconstruction as a “critical juncture” for the political economy in general and garbage collection in particular. Analyses of critical junctures must be sensitive to power asymmetries in the moment of change (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007, pp. 353-354). This allows me to look at the power of the consociational elite cartel and the wider structural constraints and opportunities they were facing at this juncture. I then narrate the steps towards crisis based on suitable sources (Bennett & Elman, 2006, pp. 459-460).

Consociational theory makes the case for rule by elite cartel while Poulantzas and Jessop argue that class interests are “condensed” in the state to produce an “accumulation strategy”. Would we be able to tell a convincing story of Lebanon’s political economy in general and Beirut garbage collection in particular if we consider the elite cartel to be consociationalism’s way of “condensing” class interests? I construct a historical narrative to provide a plausibility test for this combination of two theories (Buthe, 2002, p. 487; Falleti, 2006). Historical narrative allows us to endogenize explanatory variables (Buthe, 2002, p. 485), in other words, to bring factors into the explanation that were previously treated as being outside the explanatory model. This is done by avoiding treating socio-economic issues as an external load in an otherwise hermetically sealed consociational system. Historical narrative also allows for sequence, where consociational power-sharing is not just influenced by political economy but where, in turn and at a later point in the narrative, the dynamics of the consociational elite cartel shape economic outcomes (Buthe, 2002, pp. 485-486). In the conclusions I briefly suggest some implications for Lebanon’s current crises and questions we can ask of other consociational systems, including Iraq. However, I make no claim to generalisability of my findings across all countries governed with consociational power-sharing.

I traced the history of Beirut’s solid waste collection since the 1990s through a variety of sources. For the 1990s I relied on secondary literature(Boutros, 2015; Muhanna, 2015; Wakim, 2006) as well as technical reports on garbage and the environment (United Nations Development Programme, 2011; Nuwayhid, et al., 1996). For the period from 2000 until 2015 I relied mainly on archives of the English-language *Daily Star* newspaper. Historians value newspapers as a source of basic information on a topic (McCulloch, 2004, p. 79). I searched the archive for relevant keywords and then checked the results for relevance. This yielded a sample of about 130 articles. I arranged them chronologically and coded them using inductive category development (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 348) according to the aspects of the topic covered in the article (e.g. Naameh landfill, Sukleen). This allowed me to construct an authoritative historical narrative of solid waste policy from 1990 to 2015. Critical reading of this source was required. The *Daily Star* was owned by the Hariri family, who were leading political players in Lebanon. While there was no reporting directly critical of the Hariris, the *Daily Star* did cover the controversy over solid waste collection in Beirut, including extensive coverage of environmentalists’ concerns and the protests to close down the Naameh landfill. In order to cover a wide variety of perspectives I also searched the weekly business title *Executive* and the archives daily newspaper *Al Akhbar*, sympathetic to March 8, and of *Al Nahar*, close to March 14, for the period of 2015. There are still inherent limitations to this method of data collection and analysis. Collusion between politicians and businesses is inherently and deliberately opaque. Key information, such as the details of government contracts, remain inaccessible. Rather than resolving this opacity, my analysis reflects the debate in the media about this.

**The Strong State: Establishment of Sukleen in the 1990s**

In the 1990s the postwar state in Lebanon was reconstructed. I argue that it was able to formulate a new accumulation strategy, albeit one that was not sustainable in the long-run, was based on rent-creation, and bred economic inequality. The war involved a process of sectarianisation through sectarian violence and geographic division (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). The Ta’if agreement of 1989 then represented a return to consociation, albeit with an adjusted formula (Hudson, 1997). It was also a war of foreign powers over Lebanon. From this perspective, the Syrian Assad regime emerged as the clear winner. In 1990 the United States and Saudi Arabia tacitly accepted Syrian intervention to defeat General Michel Aoun’s forces, which had sought to rid Lebanon of Damascus’ influence (Kerr, 2005; Hanf, 1993). This period of Syrian domination is a crucial piece in the story of postwar political economy. Finally, the civil war was a war over Lebanon’s economy. Lebanon lost its role as financial and trade intermediary between Arab East and Western economies. Later, the Christian right’s attempt to reopen but monopolise the entrepot economy led to conflict with rival economic interests tied to Gulf capital, especially Lebanese-born Saudi contractor Rafiq Hariri (Hourani, 2015). It was the latter who won out in the end.

Lebanese capitalism was thus shaped by a re-established consociational elite cartel, membership of which was contingent on accepting Syria’s dominance in the country. Who were these elites in the cartel and what does it tell us about how class is “condensed” into the state? Lebanon was to be integrated into Gulf circuits of capital by Rafiq Hariri and his network of technocrats and business associates (Baumann, 2017; Hanieh, 2018). Former militia leaders, meanwhile, were keen to invest their wartime gains into postwar economic schemes, while also seeking access to state resources to maintain their patronage networks (Picard, 2000, p. 317; Salti & Chaaban, 2010). This was the context for a renewed round of rent-creation and rent-sharing, a division of the “spoils of truce” (Leenders, 2012). The state was by no means “weak” or immobile but granted economic agencies exceptional powers, including the central bank or the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) (Leenders, 2012; Mouawad & Baumann, 2017). They represented an agile state which mobilised billions of dollars, mainly from the Lebanese diaspora, Gulf investors, and foreign donors. These institutions kick-started rent-creation in real estate and finance: The reconstruction of central Beirut by private developer *Solidere* and the currency peg to the US dollar. Both encouraged capital inflows by diaspora and Gulf capital into banking, real estate and tourism. It is this bubble which burst in the currency collapse of 2019.

Lebanon’s postwar elite cartel was shaped by continued sectarianism: Politicians were representing “their” sects in a consociational power-sharing system. Crucially, between 1990 and 2005, Syria remained the arbiter of who was allowed to participate in the cartel. However, consociationalism and Syrian interference alone cannot explain the postwar economy. Gulf contractor Rafiq Hariri and his associates were sharing the “spoils” with former militia leaders and Syrian allies who could have exerted a veto over his schemes. The elite cartel of consociationalism was thus not just marked by the actors’ sectarian identities but also their economic interests: Gulf contractors investing in real estate and banking and others seeking a share of the rents and maintaining their patronage networks. This is where Poulantzas’ concepts are useful: Gulf capital became “internal” to the Lebanese social formation and was “condensed” into the state via the consociational elite cartel. The CDR and central bank were material expressions of this process. Privatised garbage collection in Beirut was next.

By law, waste collection had been in the hands of municipalities (Abu-Rish, 2015, p. 37). Before the war waste workers in Beirut were among the oldest unions in Lebanon and among the country’s strongest unions in the 1960s and 1970s (Abu-Rish, 2015, p. 37; Muhanna, 2015). During the civil war the no-mans’ land of the “green line” divided Beirut into East and West. The capital’s detritus piled up at the Normandy landfill, the point where the green line met the sea (Muhanna, 2015). By 1990, Beirut municipality’s capabilities had atrophied. Waste workers were of advanced age and many close to retirement (Muhanna, 2015). In the early 1990s, Hariri strategically placed former employees, business associates, or other allies into positions of economic influence, including in the central bank and finance ministry (Denoeux & Springborg, 1998). In Beirut, Hariri supporter Muhammad Ghaziri became Beirut mayor in 1992 while former employee of Hariri’s engineering company Oger, Nikolas Saba, became governor of Beirut in 1994 (Lebanon Report, Winter 1995). In an expose of post-civil war corruption, leftist parliamentarian Najah Wakim claims that Ghaziri stripped the municipality of its power in a process which he characterises as the “privatisation” of Beirut municipality (Wakim, 2006, p. 157).

Waste services in Beirut and Mount Lebanon were outsourced to a private company owned by Maysarah Sukkar who had been an associate of Hariri’s construction company Oger in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s (Daily Star, 10 November 1998). An initial contract was signed in 1994 but not between Sukkar’s outfit and the municipality – nominally in charge of waste collection – but between Sukkar’s company and CDR (Muhanna, 2015). This arrangement was cemented by the “emergency plan” for waste for greater Beirut in 1997, which confirmed the CDR’s role in the capital’s waste management (United Nations Development Programme, 2011, p. 272). The CDR was headed by Fadl Shalaq, who had been an engineer at Hariri’s company Oger (Shalaq, 2006). The scope of the work was continuously expanded to include collection and treatment of Beirut’s municipal waste as well as street sweeping. The geographic scope was also extended (Muhanna, 2015). Sukleen’s sister company Sukomi was in charge of landfilling and composting. The parent company to both was Averda. Payment occurred not through the municipalities but directly from the Independent Municipal Fund, a pot where the Ministry of Finance deposits various taxes and fees it collects on behalf of the municipalities (Harb & Atallah, 2015, pp. 212-213). The fund is managed by the Ministry of the Interior. Critics have charged that Sukleen’s arrangement is a way to drain the Independent Municipal Fund (Muhanna, 2015; Daily Star, 13 September 2003; Daily Star 30 August 2003). Agencies “allotted” to Hariri under the consociational formula were thus in charge of privatising garbage collection in Beirut. The state played a central role in rent-creation. It was agile rather than immobilised by consociationalism. This process was driven by the interests of a Gulf contractor. To put it in terms used by Jessop, a Gulf contractors’ presence and central position in the consociational elite cartel meant that he could shape the state’s accumulation strategy.

The exact terms of Sukleen’s contracts are confidential. Critics of the contracts always charged that costs were far higher than in comparable settings elsewhere. In 2015, activists, politicians, or media claimed variously that Averda received $130 per ton of garbage or up to $174, compared to $38 in Amman and $20 in Cairo (Daily Star, 17 January 2015; Daily Star, 22 July 2015; Executive, 1 September 2015). Sukleen defended itself against these accusations by pointing out that contracts elsewhere would not be directly comparable to Sukleen’s in Beirut (Daily Star, 17 January 2015). What is certain is that there is a lack of transparency over the terms of the contract (Executive, 5 August 2015). Access to these rents remained contested within the consociational elite cartel. In 1998, Hariri was side-lined by new president and close Syrian ally Emile Lahoud. The technocrat Salim al-Hoss succeeded Hariri as prime minister. With Hariri no longer in charge of the state machinery, it was turned against the billionaire to investigate any potential conflicts of interest, including Sukleen. The audit bureau raised repeated concerns over the legality of contracts between CDR and Sukleen (Muhanna, 2015; Daily Star, 30 August 2003).

If we accept Leenders’ claim that postwar economic spoils were “allotted” within the elite cartel, then it appears Hariri had been “allotted” the Beirut garbage portfolio. In the early 1990s the allocation of such quotas occurred relatively smoothly because all members of the elite cartel accepted certain rules: Syria’s overlordship could not be criticised, rule by consociational elite cartel had returned, and Hariri was allowed to initiate a restructuring of the economy. All three of these elements are crucial in understanding governance at this critical juncture in the 1990s. What was happening was not only driven by power-sharing between sectarian elites alone, but by sections of Gulf capital: Lebanese contractor Rafiq Hariri who had grown wealthy in Saudi Arabia returned to his native country as prime minister and turned it into an outlet for Gulf investors. This included privatised garbage collection in Beirut. Through real estate, banking, and contracting, Gulf capital became “internal” to the Lebanese political economy. Previously “foreign” capital thus become “condensed” into the state when Hariri was welcomed into the consociational elite cartel. The elite cartel is thus interesting not only for its sectarian character but also its class character. The flaw in consociational theory is that it makes the case for an elite cartel but remains disinterested in the political economy such an elite cartel may produce. The state which this constellation of the elite cartel produced was temporarily “strong” and agile: It was able to restart rent-based accumulation. While this was not sustainable in the long run, it was an “accumulation strategy” of sorts. By 2015, however, the contradictions of rent-based accumulation had become obvious. While Lebanon’s politicians and the central bank could hold off financial collapse for another four years, the Beirut garbage crisis was a harbinger of a wider collapse and it signalled the “weakening” of the state and return to consociational immobilism.

**The Weak State: The 2015 Garbage Crisis**

Garbage is an “uncooperative commodity”, not easily constrained for profit (Bakker, 2005): It is bulky, it stinks, it leaks, it falls apart, it is toxic, it collapses when heaped, and the gases it produces can catch fire. Plutocrats more interested in earning rents from waste rather than controlling this volatile pile of trash can eventually lose control of the commodity. And this is what happened in Lebanon. The state eventually proved “weak” in the face of garbage piling up.

At the end of the civil war in 1990, Beirut waste disposal had been dysfunctional. Garbage burning and uncontrolled dumping were still common in the absence of a suitable landfill (Nuwayhid, et al., 1996, pp. 171-172). The situation improved markedly as the 1990s progressed and Sukleen was put in charge. Sukleen trucked garbage to the new Naameh landfill, which opened in 1997. The system of waste collection and landfilling was of course always precarious, with sporadic garbage crises, for instance in Beirut 1997. The 1997 garbage emergency plan for Beirut epitomises the state’s inability to formulate long-term solutions to Beirut’s garbage problems (Boutros, 2015). After much delay and dithering, public pressure had forced the government’s hand to close the civil war era Bourj Hammoud landfill in 1997. Further protests forced the government to abandon plans for an incinerator at Amrousiye (Daily Star, 21 August 2003). The 1997 emergency plan was to govern waste collection and disposal in greater Beirut until 2015. The way it was executed put exorbitant pressure on Naameh. According to the plan, Sukleen was supposed to collect 1,700 tons per day. Of this, they were supposed to recover 160 tons of recyclable material (9.4 percent) and 300 tons of organic material for composting (17.6 percent) (United Nations Development Programme, 2011, p. 277). Lebanese waste is particularly rich in organic material, so composting is an important aspect of efforts to minimise the amount of waste that makes it to the landfill. However, not only did Sukleen have to collect a lot more garbage than expected but it only recycled about 6 to 7 percent and composted only 13 percent. This meant that an excessive amount of solid waste ended up in the Naameh landfill. There is one composting plant in Karantina but volumes were low, compost was not of sufficient quality, and it was feared to contain heavy metals (Daily Star, 31 January 2003). Instead of receiving 1,240 tons a day, as envisaged in the original plan of 1997, Naameh had to accommodate 1,955 tons per day in 2000 and 2,300 tons per day in 2010 (United Nations Development Programme, 2011, pp. 274, 277). The landfill as originally designed was to serve greater Beirut for ten years but filled up after only three (Daily Star, 7 January 2004). Sukleen’s contract was based on quantity of waste collected, providing little incentive to recycle or compost (United Nations Development Programme, 2011, p. 273; Muhanna, 2015). Naameh’s capacity had been supposed to be 2 million tons but by 2015 it had reportedly received 15 million (Daily Star, 12 July 2003; Daily Star, 27 July 2015).

While the state had been strong and capable in rent-creation, it proved incapable of taming the garbage behemoth. The logic of consociational power-sharing played a key role. Firstly, plans for incinerators and new landfills were never realised. A US$55 million World Bank loan was premised on building 10 landfills, which the CDR failed to do, losing part of the funding in the process (Daily Star, 27 January 2001; Daily Star, 30 August 2003; Daily Star, 8 May 1999). Leaders refused to allow landfilling or incineration in their constituents’ backyard. The obstruction by individual politicians is an example of “immobilism” to which Lebanese consociationalism had returned. Secondly, consociationalism creates an unaccountable elite cartel. Whether public services such as electricity, water, or garbage collection are delivered does not matter a great deal to elites who remain in power either way. Services they care about are the ones that can be turned into patronage. Examples include health centres as “brick and mortar clientelism” (Cammett, 2014), access to subsidised private education (Johnson, 1986), or public sector jobs (Salloukh, 2019). Garbage collection could not be provided in a way that could be exclusively delivered to supporters: Either garbage is collected in a whole street, quarter, or city, or it is not. Removing garbage only from supporters’ doorsteps would still leave them with the stink of everyone else’s waste. Clientelism in Lebanon disincentivises the provision of public goods from which non-supporters cannot be excluded (Deets, 2018, p. 140).

When Tammam Salam took the post of prime minister in February 2014 he inherited the garbage issue but was unable to extend Naameh’s lifespan. The government and environment minister Mohammed Machnouk struggled to agree on a workable plan. The deadline to close Naameh in January 2015 came and had to be pushed back to July. The government came up with a waste plan, which was never published or implemented (Executive, 12 October 2015). The first Sukleen contract in 1994 and the emergency plan of 1997 happened against the background of the postwar settlement (Leenders, 2012). Syrian domination, the re-establishment of consociational power-sharing, and Gulf capitalist Rafiq Hariri shaping “reconstruction”. By 2015, this concord was no more. Rafiq Hariri’s son Saad had taken over his father’s mantle. The elder Hariri had been assassinated in 2005. Following the assassination, Saad Hariri accused the Syrian regime of his father’s murder. Most of the Sunni community rallied around Hariri after the assassination of “their” most prominent politician. The leading Druze politician Walid Junblat also joined Hariri’s political coalition, as well as several Christian parties, and some non-sectarian leftist voices who were rejecting Syria’s heavy hand. The March 14 coalition, named after the date of a demonstration, called for Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon. The United States, France, and Saudi Arabia were all supporting March 14 and putting pressure on the Assad regime. By the following month, Syrian forces had withdrawn. Syria’s main allies were the Shia movements Amal and Iran’s Lebanese ally Hizballah. They became the nucleus of March 8 after the date of a demonstration to thank the Assad regime for its “support” to Lebanon. They were later joined by prominent Christian politician Michel Aoun, who was historically at loggerheads with other politicians in his community. This deepening split led to a near-breakdown of consociational power-sharing. Parliamentary terms had to be extended several times and the political factions failed to agree presidential succession in 2014 after incumbent Michel Sleiman’s term had ended.

These divisions within the ruling elite cartel made it impossible to resolve the looming crisis over the closure of the Naameh landfill. A cabinet meeting in December 2014 was symptomatic: The agenda included the “garbage file” but in cabinet meeting after cabinet meeting, the issue could not be tackled without agreement on the presidency (Daily Star, 18 December 2014; Daily Star 8 January 2015; Saily Star 24 July 2015; Daily Star 25 August 2015; Daily Star, 5 September 2015). Beirut newspapers were reporting that politicians were bickering to capture rents from Beirut garbage collection to succeed the Sukleen contract (Al Akhbar, 28 July 2015; Daily Star, 27 July 2015; Executive, 1 September 2015). Hariri was to find it impossible to construct elite agreement behind Sukleen like his father had done in the more placid political waters of the 1990s. While the elite cartel had been agile in rent-seeking through garbage privatisation in the 1990s, it returned to immobilism when it came to solving the long-term waste-management issues this decision had raised.

**Conclusions**

Consociationalism’s contribution to the state debate tends to be framed negatively: Power-sharing among an elite cartel is a way to prevent centrifugal forces of sectarianism leading to the disintegration of the state (Dunleavy & O'Leary, 1987, pp. 201-202). Instead of interpreting consociationalism as an elite theory of the state, I instead turned to Poulantzas and Jessop, who see the state as a terrain of struggle (Poulantzas, 1973, p. 45; Poulantzas, 1978, pp. 123-160; Jessop, 2007, pp. 21-53). Furthermore, the state plays a positive role by formulating an accumulation strategy for the economy. The consociational elite cartel is thus a site where class interests are condensed and where this process becomes legible. This idea from Poulantzas and Jessop is the theoretical contribution of this article. Gulf capital became internal to the Lebanese social formation – most obviously through Hariri’s inclusion in the consociational elite cartel. The state was reshaped through *muhasasa*, the allotment of quotas to different members of the elite cartel. The state’s postwar accumulation strategy then mimicked Gulf states in their focus on finance and neoliberal urbanism. Lebanon became an outlet for Gulf capital.

The empirical contribution of this article is the first historical narrative of the political economy of the 2015 garbage crisis. The historical narrative shows how Gulf capital became “internal” to the Lebanese domestic social formation, affecting everyday life in the capital. At the critical juncture of the early 1990s, garbage collection was privatised for the benefit of a business associate of Rafiq Hariri. The temporary “strength” of the state was influenced by the dynamics of the consociation in the early 1990s: The elite cartel had been restored, Syria was imposing discipline on its members, and Hariri was given leeway to initiate rent-creation schemes. The dynamics of consociational politics were deeply implicated in the political economy that drove garbage collection. Importantly, this was not due to immobilism. On the contrary, the specific dynamics of consociation at this juncture enabled contractor-turned-prime minister Rafiq Hariri to put in place a range of rent-creation mechanisms. The state was agile, not immobile.

Immobilism becomes crucial in the second part of the narrative, the gestation and management of the crisis. Neither private contractor Sukleen nor municipal or central government agencies were able to handle the “uncooperative commodity” that is garbage. This is how the Naameh landfill overfilled and no replacement was found. In order to understand politicians’ inaction, we also have to recognise that they have little incentive to provide non-excludable public goods. Finally, the division within the elite cartel into rival camps, March 8 and March 14, meant that, in 2015, almost all government policy initiatives were blocked at cabinet level because actors seeking a “grand bargain” over key posts – not least the presidency – were exerting a veto over resolving issues such as garbage. The gridlock meant that the elite cartel failed to “re-allot” Beirut garbage collection. Just like the dynamics of the consociational elite cartel had shaped successful garbage collection in the 1990s, they now blocked the resolution of the garbage crisis. Immobilism was back. Beirut’s garbage was no external load on consociation. Consociation was at the heart of the political economy of Beirut’s garbage.

My findings can help us interpret Lebanon’s current crises. They clarify causes. An unaccountable elite cartel enabled banks to appropriate rents through irresponsible and unsustainable financial practices, Lebanon’s poor and its middle class saw their living standards plunge when the currency peg collapsed in 2019. The currency crises eroded Lebanese households’ savings while inflation and poverty rates skyrocketed in an import-dependent economy. Access to food, electricity, and safe drinking water have become precarious. The 2020 port explosion killed over 200 and destroyed large parts of the capital. The cause of the explosion can be traced back to poor governance of the port – a lucrative source of rents in which most political factions have a stake. The severity of the multiple crises undermines the legitimacy of the very elites who are meant to ensure the success of consociation. Since 2015 Lebanon has seen a string of protests which have echoed the 2015 garbage protest but also surpassed them in participant numbers and geographic reach. Consociationalists have argued that this form of power-sharing prevents communal violence, protects minorities, and enables electoral democracy in countries such as Lebanon. The case of Lebanon suggests that rent-seeking by the consociational elite cartel can cause not only public policy failures but also severe economic crises. Advocates of consociational power-sharing must therefore pay urgent attention to the economic effects of their prescription.

My findings here and the conversation between Jessop and Poulantzas’ conception of the state with consociational theory suggests a set of questions that can be asked. What class interests to consociational elites represent? Does the specific consociational arrangement in a country tend to “agility” or “immobilism” at a particular moment? Is the resulting accumulation strategy based on elite rent-seeking or on a more sustainable basis? Such questions could be asked of other consociational cases such as Bosnia Herzegovina or Northern Ireland. I will illustrate this on the example of Iraq, which is the other case treated in this special issue. If the consociational elite cartel is a site where class interests condensed into the state then it would be instructive to see how the Iraqi state “crystallises” societal interests, as Dodge puts it in this special issue. Iraq and Lebanon share similar dynamics of *muhasasa* (Abdullah, 2019; Dodge, 2019) but the underlying political economy differs: While postwar Lebanon’s rent-creation revolved around finance and real estate, Iraqi rents derive from oil (Costantini, 2017). In Iraq post-2003, it would be interesting to analyse mechanisms and dynamics of capital accumulation among business cronies of the elite cartel. Like in Lebanon, the economic failures in Iraq have triggered repeated protest waves in 2015 and 2019. My findings thus provide a framework of analysis for such a political economy of consociationalism.

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