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Rewriting the Codes of the Possible. Culture in Action and Semiotic Repertoires in Protests and Post-Protest Lebanon (2019-2021)

Èlia Susanna i López

EMBRACE

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About the EMBRACE project

The EMBRACE research project (2022-25) collects evidence-based knowledge on the obstacles to democratisation and ways to overcome them in five regions of the European neighbourhood: Southern Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Western Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and pro-democracy forces to develop effective strategies to promote democratic progress in the European neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, new policy tools for EUDP practitioners and pro-democracy activists are developed based on the project's findings.

The EMBRACE consortium consists of 14 partner organisations based in 13 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development.

Empirical data was gathered in twelve case study countries through a variety of research approaches, investigating episodes of political closure and opening to identify, analyse and explain behavioural, institutional and structural blockages, and the conditions under which they can be overcome. A new quantitative dataset was generated on the larger trends of EU Democracy Promotion and its effects on democratisation over the last two decades in all 23 neighbours.

The research is structured around four thematic clusters: the re-configurations for democratic policy shifts after popular uprisings; democratisation and economic modernisation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes; the nexus between democratisation and peace; and the geopolitics of EUDP and the competition that the EU encounters in its democracy promotion efforts.

1 Introduction

This research analyses the 2019 Arab Spring in Lebanon through the lens of the theory of culture in action, developed primarily by Swidler (1985; 1995). This perspective is especially relevant for studying processes of political change, critical junctures, and trajectories toward democratisation, as it allows for an examination of how the cultural repertoires and semiotic codes of the population transform, condition, enable, or hinder the rooting of deep political transformations into the society.

I argue that understanding moments of democratic mobilisation requires close attention not only to institutions and political opportunity structures, but also to the semiotic codes, symbolic repertoires, and strategies of action that emerge, shift, or become sedimented in the symbolic imaginaries and collective memories of the society in the course of social movements.

The core objective of this paper is then to explore a case study, Lebanon, and analyse how cultural repertoires were reconfigured during and after the 2019 protests, and how these symbolic changes shaped — and continue to shape — the possibilities for democratisation. My analysis highlights how actors navigate competing cultural codes, interpret and reread and redefine political crises, political attitudes, and deploy symbolic cultural resources to imagine, enact and make sense of political dynamics and political change. Through this perspective, the paper contributes to the field of democratisation studies from an anthropological perspective by foregrounding the cultural dimensions of political agency in society in contexts of upheaval and institutional fragility.

The research presented here is based on a fieldwork conducted for the EMBRACE project from January 2024 to June 2025. During my fieldwork, twenty in-depth interviews were carried out with Lebanese citizens of diverse ages, genders, and backgrounds who participated in or were affected by the protests. These encounters were intellectually transformative and offered rich insight into the reinterpretation of key political concepts such as citizenship, resilience, and dignity. The narratives gathered are analysed through the conceptual tools offered by Swidler and other cultural theorists, with the aim of identifying how semiotic codes were destabilised, reassembled, and, in some cases, reabsorbed into dominant political discourses.

While existing literature on democratisation often privileges formal institutions, elite negotiations, or economic factors, this paper takes a different approach. I argue that profound and lasting political transformation cannot occur without changes in the symbolic infrastructure of society — that is, in the cultural frameworks that shape what citizens perceive as legitimate, possible, and desirable. In doing so, the paper bridges a gap between political sociology and cultural anthropology, proposing a framework for understanding democratisation as a process that is not only institutional but also semiotic and cultural.

The Lebanese case offers a particularly fertile ground for this inquiry. The 2019 uprisings, often referred to as a second wave of the Arab Spring, represented a critical juncture during which dominant cultural codes — such as sectarian loyalty and clientelist logics — were openly contested. Yet the aftermath of the protests revealed the fragility of symbolic innovation and the difficulties of translating cultural shifts into institutional reforms. This paradox — between the cultural creativity of the uprising and the endurance of structural stagnation — lies at the heart of this analysis.

Importantly, my own position as an external researcher — neither Lebanese nor embedded in the immediate aftermath of the protest — has required me to pay particular attention to the meanings that actors themselves assign to their actions. The insights presented in this paper emerged through long conversations, careful listening, and the interpretive work of connecting lived experiences to broader cultural and political frameworks.

The implications of this research also extend beyond Lebanon. By highlighting how cultural change operates in moments of crisis, this study invites policymakers, including actors such as the European Union, to reconsider their approaches to democracy promotion. Supporting democratic transformation requires more than institutional engineering; it demands engagement with the lived cultural practices and symbolic repertoires that sustain or hinder political change at the grassroots level.

This paper is structured in three main parts. First, I present the theoretical framework of the research, engaging with Ann Swidler's theory of culture in action, its core theses, and the critiques it has generated, complemented by contributions from other authors who have approached culture as a symbolic resource and situated practice. Second, I provide a brief account of the fieldwork methodology, inspired by Swidler's own analytical approach, through an exploratory qualitative design aimed at examining how the culture-in-action framework can be applied to contexts of political crisis and democratisation. This includes 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with Lebanese activists who took part in the 2019 mobilisation, focused on identifying how semiotic codes and repertoires of action transformed during that moment of change. Third, I offer an empirical analysis of the Lebanese protests, showing how cultural repertoires were mobilised, contested, and partially sedimented in the wake of the uprising. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the significance of cultural change in democratisation processes and its implications for future research and practice.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Culture in Action and the Reconfiguration of Political Analysis

This study begins from a central premise: major political transformations cannot be fully understood without attention to how citizens perceive, interpret, and act upon changing realities. It is not enough to analyse institutions, material interests, or organisational opportunities; rather, it is essential to examine the cultural repertoires and symbolic codes that orient action and make certain strategies thinkable. In doing so, this section situates Ann Swidler's "culture in action" approach as the conceptual cornerstone of the analysis, while situating her work in dialogue with classical and contemporary theories of culture in sociology and anthropology.

The marginal role of culture in much of social movement theory and democratisation studies has long been noted. Structuralist and rational-choice frameworks have emphasised resources, opportunities, or cost–benefit calculations, often relegating culture to the background or treating it as a residual explanatory factor. Swidler's theoretical framework (1986; 1995; 2001) offers a fundamental reorientation. Rather than conceiving of culture as a set of internalised values that motivate behaviour, she proposes to see it as a heterogeneous repertoire of public resources—semiotic codes, practices,

narratives, and symbols—upon which actors draw selectively and strategically. In unsettled times, such as moments of protest, rupture, or crisis, these repertoires become especially visible and contested. For Swidler, culture is not epiphenomenal; it is constitutive of action, providing both the scaffolding for collective mobilisation and the interpretive frames that sustain political engagement.

This perspective represents a deliberate critique of older paradigms. Classical sociology often conceived culture as an internalized set of beliefs guiding action in a relatively coherent way. The canonical example is Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963), which linked democratic stability to the prevalence of supportive political values and attitudes among citizens. Their contribution was seminal, offering the first systematic attempt to link micro-level orientations to macro-level political outcomes. Yet their approach assumed that culture operates as a stock of values measurable through surveys, largely overlooking the strategic and contested uses of repertoires. As Swidler emphasizes, such an inventory-based conception fails to explain why individuals facing similar situations may act in profoundly different ways, or why forms of mobilization emerge suddenly at certain historical junctures but not at others.

Swidler's alternative builds upon insights from anthropology and sociology. Authors such as Bourdieu (1977), Sahlins (1985), and Sewell (1999) stressed that culture provides meaning but does not mechanically determine behaviour. Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, for instance, emphasized durable dispositions that orient practice, but Swidler distances herself from the rigidity of this formulation. Instead, she insists on the flexibility and contestability of repertoires: the same individual may invoke cultural codes to reaffirm or to challenge prevailing social structures, depending on context. Culture is thus best understood as a toolkit of available strategies, some consciously chosen, others mobilised unconsciously, but always shaped by power relations and institutional constraints.

This reframing is especially relevant to contexts of democratisation and contentious politics, where the role of culture has often been neglected. Democratisation studies have focused primarily on elite bargains, institutional breakdowns, or external pressures, while treating culture as background. By contrast, applying Swidler's framework to the Lebanese uprising of 2019 and related Arab protests highlights how cultural codes are recombined in real time, producing novel forms of collective and individual action. Protesters did not merely express economic grievances or institutional distrust; they articulated new symbolic vocabularies—of citizenship, dignity, accountability, and anti-sectarianism—that reconfigured the boundaries of the possible. These symbolic shifts, in turn, left enduring traces in civic practices and imaginaries, even as repression and collapse constrained immediate political outcomes.

The innovation of this analytical move is twofold. First, it places culture at the centre of explanations of political change, not as noise or residual motivation but as an active structuring dimension. Second, it enables us to see mobilizations not only as institutional crises but also as semiotic reconfigurations: moments when new narratives, symbols, and practices begin to crystallise. As Swidler notes, unsettled times are precisely those in which cultural codes become visible, contested, and available for reworking (1986: 279). Lebanon in 2019 exemplifies such a moment, as ordinary citizens experimented with repertoires that departed sharply from sectarian codes, even if these repertoires later collided with entrenched power structures.

This perspective has direct implications for external actors such as the European Union. Without attention to cultural semiotics emerging from below, external policies risk disconnection from lived realities. EU engagement has often privileged technocratic or institutional reforms, overlooking the grassroots transformations that redefine citizenship and democracy in practice. By paying attention to the symbolic repertoires circulating among citizens—whether attitudes and understandings towards politics, citizenry, rights and duties, slogans, rituals of protest, or new vocabularies of accountability—the EU could better align its interventions with citizens' expectations, avoiding the perception of external imposition and engaging with the power coming from the citizenry, from the grassroots. More importantly, such attention allows external actors to anticipate transformations before they solidify into institutional crises, enabling proactive support before during and after protests or movements take place. As one Lebanese lawyer put it: "The shift toward a democratic process can only be achieved by us, from within, as citizens, changing one law after another."[1] Without grasping the reconfiguration of imaginaries, hidden transcripts, and cultural codes, political change risks fragility and reversibility.

This is not a marginal concern. As Taylor (2004: 23) has argued, "durable political change requires a transformation of the social imaginary—the way ordinary people imagine their social existence." Similarly, Scott (1985: xv) reminds us that revolutions are intelligible only if we analyse not just institutions and elites, but also the hidden transcripts and symbolic practices of everyday life. The Lebanese case is an ideal context to bring these insights together: a society where entrenched sectarian institutions coexist with powerful new imaginaries of civic dignity and trans-sectarian solidarity. The theoretical framework developed here thus insists that understanding the 2019 protests requires us to trace how cultural repertoires were mobilised, reconfigured, and contested across regions and cohorts.

2.2. From Cultural Repertoires to Strategies of Action

The second part of the framework deepens this discussion by specifying how culture shapes strategies of action. Here the analysis moves from theoretical foundations to the dynamics of repertoire selection, drawing on Swidler's contributions and engaging critically with parallel traditions—from Parsons's functionalism to Geertz's interpretive anthropology, Bourdieu's theory of habitus, and critiques from Sewell, Alexander, Lamont, and others.

Swidler's thesis of culture in action represents a decisive break from functionalist and essentialist views. Parsons (1951), drawing on Weber and Durkheim, conceptualized culture as a coherent system of norms and values ensuring social integration. In his AGIL model, culture was the subsystem that provided meaning and orientation, internalized by individuals to ensure stability. Culture, in this view, functioned as an integrative mechanism—uniform, cohesive, and relatively static. While powerful as a model of order, this framework left little room for contestation, multiplicity, or strategic use. For

[1] As will be developed in the methodology section, all personae in this article are ideal-typical composites constructed from my interview corpus to illustrate the analysis and are fully pseudonymised; they do not correspond to identifiable individuals and, for safety and to prevent recognition, the pseudonyms may vary across sections of the text.

Swidler, such functionalism fails to capture how individuals and groups selectively mobilize cultural codes in practice, particularly in moments of crisis.

Geertz (1973), by contrast, offered an interpretive turn. His "thick description" of rituals, such as the Balinese cockfight, highlighted how symbols embody meaning and how culture functions as a text to be interpreted. This perspective advanced the study of meaning but retained essentialist assumptions: it implied that rituals reveal deep, coherent worldviews, representative of entire communities. Swidler critiques this move as overly totalizing. Symbols may be powerful in ritual moments, but what matters for political analysis is how ordinary actors select, recombine, or even discard these symbols in daily practice. A thick description of Shia rituals in Lebanon, for example, cannot by itself explain why many Shia youth joined anti-sectarian protests in 2019 while others abstained. To understand such variation, we must see culture as a toolkit of resources mobilized differently depending on circumstances and contexts.

Against both functionalism and thick description, Swidler insists on the heterogeneity and flexibility of repertoires depending on context, her outside-in approach. Culture is not a coherent system imposed on actors; it is a loose set of symbols, narratives, and practices available for use. This view aligns partially with Bourdieu's habitus but departs from its rigidity. Bourdieu (1977, 1984) stressed that durable dispositions shape perception and practice, embedding inequality and reproducing structure. Swidler accepts that much of culture operates unconsciously, yet she emphasises that actors often hold culture at a distance, question it, or mobilise it strategically. The same repertoire may serve to challenge or to reinforce hierarchy. Thus, while habitus stresses reproduction, Swidler highlights creativity and contestation.

This distinction is crucial for understanding Lebanon. Citizens affirmed values of dignity and solidarity during the protests, but when material crises deepened after 2020, many reactivated sectarian repertoires to secure services or protection. This does not imply abandonment of protest values; rather, it illustrates the selective, strategic mobilisation of different cultural tools depending on shifting contexts.

Critiques of Swidler's framework refine this picture. Sewell (1992) warns that the toolkit metaphor risks overemphasising rational choice, echoing Lévi-Strauss's notion of bricolage but minimizing unconscious structuring effects. Alexander (2003) similarly argues that Swidler presupposes almost unlimited agency, overlooking how emotions, habits, and unconscious schemas constrain action. Lamont (1992) and Griswold (2000) stress that access to repertoires is unequal: class, gender, and race shape which cultural tools are available or legitimate. This point is particularly salient in the Lebanese context, where rural Shia communities and the urban middle classes or Christian communities, for instance, confront markedly different symbolic and material resources, exhibit unequal access to and use of cultural tools, and operate within sectarian hierarchies that regulate their very capacity to mobilize such tools. The empirical grounding of this research will make these divergences especially clear.

Swidler herself acknowledges these inequalities, noting that not all tools are available in all contexts. Culture is always situated in fields of power. Dominant institutions attempt to co-opt cultural symbols, reframing them to neutralize their disruptive potential. For example, Lebanese elites after 2019 appropriated the discourse of reform—"yes, change is needed, but thank goodness we are here"—to

maintain patronage. Yet social movements often resist such co-optation by developing counter-hegemonic codes, alternative rituals, and practices of solidarity, as is the case of NGOs which deliver services (see empirical grounding). This cultural struggle is central to contentious politics.

Tilly's notion of repertoires of contention (1978, 1995) complements Swidler's framework. For Tilly, repertoires are historically shaped sets of routines available for making claims. They are neither infinite nor static; they evolve through interactions between movements and institutions. This perspective highlights how protest forms—marches, strikes, sit-ins—are learned and adapted. Combined with Swidler, it underscores that repertoires are both symbolic and practical: they provide not only meanings but also routines of action which permeate everyday life and habits.

Swidler also resonates with Foucault's concern for discontinuities and struggles between discourses (1970, 1972). Yet while Foucault analysed the architecture of discursive regimes, Swidler focuses on how actors navigate between competing codes in practice. She emphasizes the polysemy of symbols and the ways in which individuals combine feminist, activists, democrats, religious, secular, and pan-Arab discourses simultaneously, as Lebanese activists did in 2019. This plurality is key: culture is not a closed system but an open set of possibilities subject to contestation depending on context.

Finally, Marxist cultural theory offers additional depth. Williams (1977) and Thompson (1963) argued that culture is part of the superstructure, shaped by class struggle, but also a terrain of contestation. This insight converges with Swidler's attention to how movements generate new codes that challenge domination. The Lebanese uprising illustrates this vividly: slogans like "All of them means all of them" and practices like collective clean-ups and mutual aid represented not only grievances but also counter-hegemonic codes that unsettled sectarian hierarchies, still existing today in the form of NGOs providing services.

In sum, Swidler's theory of culture in action enables us to understand culture as scaffolding: a structure that makes certain strategies plausible without determining them. It emphasizes that actors interpret, select, and recombine cultural tools depending on context, and that institutions and power relations regulate which repertoires are available or legitimate under diverse circumstances. Critiques remind us to account for unconscious dispositions, inequalities of access, and the structuring effects of power. Applied to Lebanon, this framework sheds light on how citizens shifted between protest repertoires and sectarian repertoires, forging new imaginaries that gradually became embedded within their cultural fabric, even as they simultaneously confronted the persistent constraints of patronage and repression.

The framework also helps explain the durability of cultural shifts. Even when protests subside, repertoires leave traces in practices, memories, and institutions. Independent syndicates, student coalitions, support NGOs, and rights-based vocabularies in Lebanon today are evidence of such sedimentation. Cultural transformations do not simply disappear in the face of political setbacks; rather, they endure as elements within the cultural toolkit, remaining available both for future episodes of mobilization and for navigating the contingencies of everyday life.

Thus, the Lebanese case underscores the analytical value of Swidler's approach. It shows that understanding political transformation requires moving beyond rationalist models of cost–benefit calculation (Euben 1995) and beyond essentialist views of culture as shared values (Adanalı 2016;

O'Neill 1996). Instead, culture must be seen as a contested repertoire of resources, mobilized selectively in contexts of crisis. By tracing these dynamics, we can grasp both the possibilities and the limits of political change in unsettled times.

2.3 When Repertoires Fracture: Moments, Limits, and Possibilities of Change

To carry this argument forward, I now turn to Swidler's clarification of how culture operates under different temporal conditions. Swidler introduces a crucial distinction that helps explain why the culture-in-action approach is particularly relevant to moments of political mobilisation and "critical junctures" (Capoccia & Kelemen 2007), such as Lebanon in 2019-2020. From her foundational 1986 text, Swidler distinguishes between settled and unsettled periods. In settled periods, marked by relative social and institutional stability, culture operates in an almost invisible, routinized manner. Cultural patterns are so deeply naturalised that they guide everyday action automatically and unconsciously. Practices are reproduced without questioning, perceived simply as "the way things are done" (Swidler 1986: 278). People act within solidified frames of meaning, and culture functions as a sedimented toolkit within social habitus.

In contrast, unsettled periods — moments of crisis, rupture, or historical transformation, such as revolutions or institutional collapse — destabilise these frames. Culture becomes visible, contested, and available for reinterpretation. In such periods, people can no longer rely on tacit conventions and must deliberately select and redefine symbolic repertoires to guide their actions (Swidler, 1986: 280; 2001: ch. 3).

There is a debate about this aspect of Swidler's theory; various scholars – most notably Alexander (2003) – have questioned the empirical clarity and theoretical rigidity of the dichotomy. Alexander argues that the boundary between routine and crisis is often blurred in lived experience, and that symbolic systems remain active even in supposedly settled contexts. Deeply held values may continue to shape action beneath the surface, even when actors are not consciously invoking them. This critique implies that the binary between settled and unsettled may oversimplify the complex, overlapping ways in which culture operates across different temporalities and situations.

Drawing on my fieldwork, "Maria" (pseudonym) explained in an interview that her mother – a devout Sunni Muslim – felt a stark contradiction between her traditional sectarian political affiliation and her emotional and practical involvement in the protests through her daughter, who participated daily, along with her own support efforts (cooking and delivering food to demonstrators). Although she had voted along sectarian lines her whole life, her mother decided for the first time to support a non-sectarian candidate.[2] This vignette illustrates how mobilisation unsettled sedimented identities and routines and enabled the recombination of tools within the cultural toolkit – often tacitly, sometimes

[2] Swidler explains, classical perspectives tended to reduce culture to an "inner system of values or ends toward which action is oriented" (Swidler, 1986, p. 273), assuming that actors behave consistently with what they believe. However, this does not account for the variability of practices, nor for the historical contingency of collective action. The cultural toolkit approach makes it possible to explain why actors, even when sharing similar values or social backgrounds, may mobilise in divergent ways depending on the symbolic repertoires and strategies available for each of them in a given moment (Swidler 1986, 1995).

deliberately – while also aligning with Alexander's point that latent symbolic commitments can persist and be reactivated under crisis-like conditions (Swidler 1986; 1995; 2001; Alexander 2003).

As Swidler notes, "during revolutions or when new ideologies emerge, societies openly debate what kind of world they want to live in and what values should guide action" (Swidler 1986: 280). The 2019 protests in Lebanon questioned not only specific government policies but the very foundations of the sectarian order. Slogans like "All means all" did not merely target political dynasties but denounced the cultural logics underlying political behaviour. Maria said: "Until then, I had never thought about politics; it felt irrelevant to me as a Lebanese. But then I joined study groups to learn the history of our country — a history we never learned at school — to understand the war. Suddenly, I realized what it meant to be a citizen. And now, when they say Lebanon is a consociationalist democracy, I reply Lebanon is not a democracy."

In light of the theory, Maria's newly developed repertoire of action extended beyond protest to include political discussion, historical inquiry, civic engagement, and vote-switching. Read through Swidler's framework, this trajectory shows (a) selection and recombination of tools (e.g., reframing domestic care as civic support; adopting national rather than party symbols; shifting from patronage appeals to rights-based claims), (b) translation of meanings across settings (from the household and kitchen to the square and ballot), and (c) early sedimentation of new habits (study groups, issue-based voting) that carry forward beyond peak mobilisation. In short, the Lebanese case exemplifies how unsettled periods widen the actionable repertoire while revealing the enduring pull – and limits – of prior symbolic commitments.

Culture, in such unsettled periods, ceases to operate as silent infrastructure and becomes a site of visible reinvention. New strategies, alternative narratives, and semiotic codes emerge to challenge dominant ones. In Swidler's words, unsettled periods are when "people are explicitly rethinking and rearticulating their beliefs and traditions" (Swidler 1986, p. 280), opening space for transformations of social imaginaries, legitimacy, and power relations.

2.4. Beneath the Surface: The Invisible Legacy of Protest after the Critical Juncture

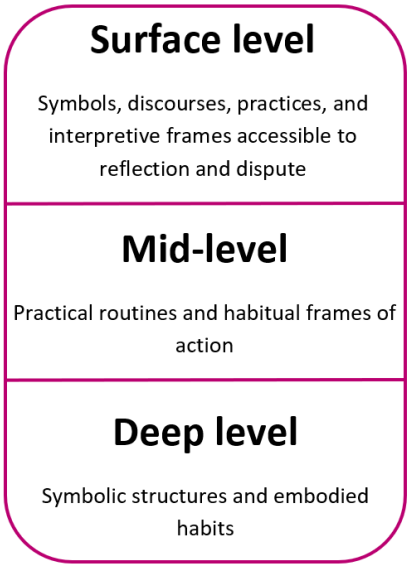
Swidler links her theory of settled and unsettled periods to a typology of cultural levels (Swidler 1986; 2001, chs. 2–3), reminiscent of Bourdieu, which supports the value of analysing semiotic changes years after mobilizations to see what is left and what has settled into the cultural toolkit of society. Culture can be conceptualised as having three layers.

First, the surface level includes publicly accessible symbols, discourses, practices, and interpretive frames that are open to reflection and dispute. This is the level that becomes visible, and can be rethought, rearticulated and questionable during unsettled periods, when culture is actively rearticulated; in Swidler's words "when people are explicitly rethinking and rearticulating their beliefs and traditions" (Swidler 2001: 62–66). It is at this level where culture is more active and deliberative.

In the second level, there is a mid-level layer of practical routines and habitual frames of action — not fully unconscious, but not subject to constant reflection. This level is filled with practical dispositions and routines, where culture is clearly functioning as a scaffolding for action, not as an explicit ideology

(Swidler 2001:67). This is when new codes and repertoires begin sedimenting into the shared culture of society. Third, the deep level comprises symbolic structures and embodied habits that guide perception and behaviour unconsciously. This level overlaps with notions like Bourdieu's habitus but emphasises its relational and eventually modifiable nature (Swidler 2001: 70–72).

Figure 1: *Symbolic Codes, Routines, and Habits: Levels of Culture in Action*



While during unsettled periods, culture becomes a source of symbolic innovation, identity redefinition, and the creation of new collective meanings. When the critical juncture passes and the window of opportunity closes, giving way to a more settled period, the innovations introduced into the cultural toolkit do not simply disappear. Some become embedded in the deeper layers of culture, shaping collective understandings and everyday practices. As Swidler (2001: 62–65, 71) notes, "some cultural elements generated during unsettled periods become sedimented into lasting institutions or habits; others disappear".

This sedimentation is not automatic, it is gradual and selective. Cultural elements, according to Swidler, are retained if they resonate with daily life and provide useful interpretive frameworks. Culture does not return to its previous state; rather, certain symbolic, ideological and narrative innovations are absorbed into deeper cultural layers, guiding future action.

In this sense, for instance, Maria's mother — who changed her voting behaviour after participating in the protests through her daughter (remember the young female's mother)— illustrates how lived experiences can trigger symbolic reconfigurations that lead to concrete political changes. The experience sedimented a new code of action within her cultural toolkit. This transformation is a good example that illustrates the potential of such moments to redefine cultural codes from inside.

Yet not all innovations persist. Many are discarded since they may become irrelevant in the new context. Some are co-opted by institutions to legitimise existing power. In Lebanon, as Mohammad recounts, sectarian leaders exploit the widely accepted idea of state failure — once marginal, now culturally sedimented — to reinforce clientelist narratives: "Since the state doesn't work, I must

provide for you," would reply an old sectarian leader who is now back to provide services for his community that the state does not provide.

This has unintended consequences. Hamid, a lawyer and activist, notes that the 2019 mobilisations have generated political disillusionment. The lack of visible change has eroded trust in transformation, prompting many to emigrate. In his view, the cultural toolkit has shifted not toward hope, but toward despair and individual retreat. This idea would reply to the question of what happened to all those hundreds of thousands that mobilised and now have disappeared? Have we lost them for democracy? In Lebanon the reply to this is retreat, migration, and acceptance of the services of the sectarian leaders and disillusionment as the state failure has not involved a change in the political system.

Ultimately, post-unsettled sedimentation is a terrain of struggle. As Scott (1990) reminds us, durable change requires persistent work within structures of power. Actors like Hamid remain committed to gradual legal and cultural reforms, convinced that structural transformation depends on reshaping political culture from within, once new symbolic frameworks and democratic values have taken root in the deeper cultural layers.

3 Methodology and Case Selection

The methodological approach of this paper combines qualitative fieldwork with interpretive analysis, situating Lebanon as a critical juncture within the broader comparative framework of the EMBRACE project. The research seeks to investigate how cultural repertoires shape political action in moments of instability. Within this framework, Lebanon was selected for both theoretical and practical reasons.

First, Lebanon represents a paradigmatic case of consociational democracy. Unlike authoritarian regimes in the region that rely on hard repression and limited pluralism, Lebanon institutionalises sectarian power-sharing, distributing positions across religious communities. This arrangement—often cited in the literature on consociationalism (Lijphart 1977; Salamey 2014)—is both fragile and resilient: it prevents outright domination by any single group, yet it fosters elite entrenchment and clientelism. The 2019 mobilisations thus constituted an unusually revealing moment to observe how ordinary citizens navigate a system that is formally democratic but substantively compromised.

Second, the October 2019 protests constituted a critical juncture in the Swidlerian sense (Swidler 1986): a period of rupture in which cultural codes became visible, contested, and reconfigured. Citizens across generations and regions articulated grievances in novel semiotic idioms—dignity, suffocation, citizenship—that displaced long-standing sectarian logics. Studying this moment provides insights into how cultural toolkits expand during unsettled times, and how these repertoires sediment (or erode) afterwards.

Third, Lebanon holds strategic importance for the European Union. As a Mediterranean neighbour, it is deeply embedded in EU policy concerns: regional stability, migration flows, and security. The EU has invested heavily in Lebanon through neighbourhood policies and humanitarian aid. Understanding how Lebanese citizens negotiate political legitimacy under crisis conditions is therefore directly relevant to the EU's external action and to debates about the prospects of democratisation in semi-democratic systems.

Finally, ethical and practical considerations were central to case selection and research design. Lebanon—prior to the escalation of violence in late 2024 and early 2025—offered comparatively open conditions for anthropological inquiry when set against more closed authoritarian regimes. The initial plan envisioned extended ethnographic immersion in Tripoli, Nabatieh, and Beirut. However, the outbreak of war with Israel, including the aerial bombardment of Beirut and southern Lebanon, rendered such fieldwork impossible. Under these circumstances, it was neither ethically responsible nor practically feasible to ask Lebanese citizens to participate in direct conversations about democracy and reform while living under bombardment. Equally, it would have been unacceptable to place a researcher at risk by sending them into areas affected by active conflict. These constraints necessitated a fundamental adaptation of the research design, privileging safety and ethical responsibility over proximity.

In response, the research design was adjusted: rather than relying on extended ethnographic immersion, I conducted twenty semi-structured online interviews (with some participants interviewed multiple times), distributed across gender, age groups, and regions. Participants included both men and women, younger and older generations, and individuals from diverse sectarian and religious backgrounds. The interviews covered residents from Tripoli (predominantly Sunni), Beirut (urban, heterogeneous), and Nabatieh in the South (predominantly Shia and politically sensitive given Hezbollah's role).

Although the economic status of interviewees was not systematically assessed, discussions often touched on the realities of both poorer groups and the middle classes. This was particularly evident in interviews with NGO workers and lawyers, who engage daily with individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and were thus able to provide rich insights into their circumstances. Nevertheless, most participants themselves belonged to the middle class, a group that has experienced significant loss of purchasing power in recent years, in line with broader national trends. It should be noted that recruiting interviewees with very limited internet access or digital literacy was extremely difficult, given that the research relied on online interviews. As a result, the sample reflects a bias toward educated, middle-class respondents, which must be taken into account in methodological reflection, even if it does not diminish the weight and quality of the empirical findings.

The online modality, while limiting in terms of embodied presence (cf. Geertz 1973 on the importance of "being there"), offered certain advantages. It enabled participation during highly insecure conditions, allowed interlocutors to speak from the safety of their homes, and facilitated recording and transcription directly onto secure servers in Europe. As Hine (2015) and Kozinets (2019) suggest, online ethnographic methods can provide legitimate insights when physical immersion is impossible, particularly in conflict zones.

All interviews were transcribed, pseudonymised, and analysed through an interpretive coding strategy (Tracy 2013). To protect participants, the material was stylised into composite personae. Each persona reflects patterns derived from several interviews, synthesising shared experiences rather than presenting verbatim individual trajectories. This strategy not only enhances confidentiality but also facilitates analysis of broader repertoires of action (Denzin & Lincoln 2018).

The transformation of individual interviewees into composite verbatim personae, as outlined in the methodology, was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti.* This facilitated

systematic coding, theme identification, and cross-case comparison, ensuring both analytical rigour and the protection of confidentiality.

Importantly, while personae were constructed for analytic clarity, direct quotations from interviewees are incorporated throughout the empirical sections to maintain authenticity. Because interviews were conducted online and stored directly in Europe, no local storage or encrypted cloud transfers were necessary. Confidentiality is further reinforced by the generality of descriptions—focusing on patterns of meaning rather than identifying details—making recognition of specific individuals highly unlikely.

The outbreak of war imposed a double ethical challenge. On the one hand, direct presence in Lebanon during bombardment would have endangered both researcher and interlocutors. On the other, it raised the question of whether it was morally appropriate to engage citizens in discussions about democracy and reform amidst acute existential threats. For this reason, fieldwork was postponed until a minimal level of security was restored. Even so, the number of interviews conducted was lower than originally planned, and anthropological immersion—as initially designed—was not possible.

Nonetheless, the reliability of findings remains robust. Twenty interviews, strategically distributed across gender, generations, and regions, provide sufficient diversity to capture core repertoires of action. Moreover, by triangulating between Beirut, Tripoli, and Nabatieh, the analysis documents regional divergences while maintaining a system-wide perspective. The reliance on composite personae enhances interpretive generalisation, echoing Stake's (1995) emphasis on case study research as both particularising and generalising.

In sum, Lebanon was selected because it exemplifies a semi-democratic system under severe strain, where sectarian consociationalism collides with citizen demands for reform. The 2019 protests constitute a critical juncture in which cultural codes were renegotiated. The outbreak of war forced methodological adaptation, shifting from intended ethnographic immersion to online interviews. Through pseudonymised composite personae and interpretive coding, the study preserves confidentiality while capturing repertoires of action across regions, generations, and genders. The results, while necessarily constrained by context, remain reliable and illuminating both for academic debates and for European policy considerations.

4 The Lebanese Puzzle: Sectarian Power-Sharing, Social Inequality, and Political Contestation

Lebanon's post-war political order is rooted in the Taif Agreement of 1989, which ended the fifteen-year Civil War (1975–1990). The agreement redistributed power between Christians and Muslims while reaffirming the principle of political sectarianism: parliamentary seats, ministerial posts, and key offices were allocated according to confessional quotas (Salamey 2014; Traboulsi 2012). Although Taif explicitly called for the "gradual abolition of sectarianism," this provision was never realized. Instead, sectarian elites entrenched their authority by expanding patronage networks and monopolising access to state resources (Frangie 2015). Attempts at reform—such as electoral law revisions or proposals for a Senate to represent sectarian groups—were repeatedly stalled, highlighting the resilience of sectarian power-sharing (Majed 2017).

This sectarian architecture has profound social implications. Public services, from electricity to waste collection, are allocated unevenly across regions and often outsourced to private or sectarian providers (Cammett 2014). Education and healthcare are highly stratified, with wealthier households relying on private institutions while poorer families face deteriorating public options. The World Bank (2016) estimated that nearly 30% of Lebanese lived below the poverty line even before the 2019 collapse, with inequality deeply structured by geography: Beirut concentrates wealth and international investment, Tripoli suffers chronic underdevelopment, and the southern regions remain dependent on Hezbollah's welfare institutions (Chaaban 2016). The result is a fragmented social fabric in which access to rights and services is mediated through sectarian affiliation rather than citizenship.

By the mid-2010s, these dynamics collided with acute economic crisis. Mismanagement, corruption, and clientelism created fiscal deficits, while reliance on banking inflows and remittances masked structural weakness (Atallah & Mahdi 2019). The Lebanese pound, pegged to the dollar since the 1990s, collapsed after 2019, losing over 90% of its value and devastating the savings of the middle class (El-Hage 2020). Electricity cuts, water shortages, and rising unemployment intensified perceptions of state failure. Social stratification hardened: the poor slid into extreme poverty, while the middle class lost purchasing power and security, leaving NGOs and sectarian networks as primary providers of welfare.

The October 2019 uprising was triggered by a government plan to tax WhatsApp calls, perceived as emblematic of elite irresponsibility. Yet the grievances extended far deeper: decades of corruption, unfulfilled promises of abolishing sectarianism, and the collapse of the welfare state (Karam & Majed 2022). Protests swept across Beirut, Tripoli, and southern towns. Beirut witnessed cross-sectarian coalitions and unprecedented participation of professionals and women; Tripoli, Lebanon's poorest city, became a "beating heart" of the uprising, framing demands around dignity and economic justice (Majed 2020); while in Nabatieh and the southern Shia areas, citizens acknowledged the need for reform but avoided frontal confrontation with Hezbollah (Frangie 2019). The common slogan "All of them means all of them" captured the shared rejection of sectarian elites, even as repertoires of action diverged across regions.

The October 2019 uprising began on 17 October, when thousands of citizens poured into the streets of Beirut after the government announced new taxes, including the now-infamous levy on WhatsApp calls. Within days, protests spread to Tripoli, Nabatieh, Tyre, Zahle, and Baalbek, turning into the largest cross-sectarian mobilization since the end of the civil war (Karam & Majed 2022). Protesters blocked highways, occupied public squares, and organized cultural events, debates, and concerts, transforming urban spaces into arenas of political experimentation. Strikingly, the movement united people across sectarian, class, and generational divides, rejecting patronage networks that had long structured political life.

Momentum grew throughout late October as hundreds of thousands joined marches, chanting "kellon yaani kellon" ("all of them means all of them") in reference to the entire political elite (Majed 2020). Women played prominent roles, both as organizers and as symbols of a new political grammar, while young activists spearheaded decentralized forms of coordination through social media (Al-Habbal 2020). Banks, schools, and businesses closed as strikes multiplied, and the country was effectively paralyzed. Under mounting pressure, Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned on 29 October 2019. Yet

protests persisted into November and December, demanding systemic reform rather than cosmetic changes. Ultimately, repression, fatigue, and the absence of clear leadership slowed the mobilization by early 2020, but the uprising left an indelible imprint on Lebanon's political culture, challenging sectarianism and normalizing discourses of accountability and citizenship (Yassin & Al-Saidi 2020).

The situation worsened dramatically with the Beirut port explosion of August 2020, which killed more than 200 people and devastated large swathes of the capital (Human Rights Watch 2021). The catastrophe epitomized decades of negligence and impunity, and together with the financial collapse and COVID-19 pandemic, it marked a profound rupture in state-society relations. For many Lebanese, resilience—once celebrated as endurance—was redefined as refusal and accountability (Majed 2021).

For the European Union, Lebanon illustrates both the limits and the necessity of engagement. The EU has long supported Lebanon through neighbourhood policies and humanitarian aid, particularly in response to the Syrian refugee crisis (European External Action Service 2021). Yet the 2019 uprising revealed that sustainable stability requires addressing structural issues: dismantling sectarian patronage, strengthening public services, and supporting civic actors who articulate universalist demands for accountability and rights.

5 Empirical Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the research, drawing on twenty semi-structured interviews with Lebanese citizens of different genders, generations, and regional backgrounds. The analysis traces how the October 2019 uprising and its aftermath unsettled long-standing symbolic codes, generating new repertoires of meaning and practice that coexist in tension with older sectarian and clientelist logics. Following Swidler's framework of culture-in-action, the testimonies reveal not only what people said but how they made sense of crisis and mobilization—how they selected, recombined, and sometimes abandoned elements of their cultural toolkit in order to articulate grievances, imagine alternatives, and navigate risks. Rather than treating culture as a background of shared values, the interviews foreground lived contestations: the reframing of citizenship, the redefinition of resilience, and the emergence of hybrid strategies that span protest squares, households, professional associations, and electoral arenas. In what follows, the empirical findings illustrate these dynamics across five thematic axes—citizenship and resistance, repertoires of action before and after 2019, civic grammars and codes of the possible, regional and generational differences, and gendered dimensions of agency—while also attending to the sedimentation and erosion of cultural shifts over time.

5.1. Citizenship, Resistance, and the Reordering of Cultural Codes

In the reflections of the interviewees, we observe a direct contestation of hegemonic semiotic codes that had long anchored political legitimacy in sectarian loyalty, paternalistic governance, and religious principles. This pattern recurs across the corpus and constitutes one of the most salient findings. Maria, a young non-practicing Muslim who studied political science at the American University of Beirut and abroad, encapsulates this paradigmatic shift with the assertion: "We are victims of a negligent state."

Her words exemplify how sectarian allegiances are displaced by a framing of victimhood at the hands of the state and by grievances articulated in terms of citizenship. Within the interpretive framework of culture-in-action, this marks a change in the cultural logic available for making sense of hardship (especially regarding services a state should guarantee): sectarian and sacral suffering is reinterpreted as the political consequence of institutional collapse—a failing state—which fosters a more substantive development of the notion of citizenship. To varying degrees, interviewees registered this transformation as a consequence of the mobilisations, openly voicing ideas that had previously been muted.

As articulated by Omar, a lawyer who refuses to emigrate because he is committed to helping his fellow citizens recover the funds withheld by the de facto banking freeze: “There is no one now who does not openly believe in the absurdity that this state is—neither the Shia nor anyone else—when we speak of the failed state and that the system does not work, everyone agrees. There are those who still exploit the system and people’s needs to make money, but the system is failed. This is undeniable to everyone today. No one would dare say otherwise.” Omar’s narrative also shows how legal language and civic concepts—accountability, rule of law, citizenship—were mobilized as alternative symbolic repertoires after 2019. These emerging codes did not fully displace clientelist or sectarian scripts; rather, they coexisted in tension, forming layered and sometimes conflicting interpretive frames that reflect an ongoing negotiation during and after unsettlement. Cultural change here proceeds through partial and contested sedimentations, expanding the cultural toolkit with new terms and practices without erasing older ones.

Similarly, Layla—a political scientist who spent years abroad and is a working mother—redefines “resilience” in a way that makes the semiotic inversion explicit: what was once celebrated as national endurance becomes a marker of systemic abandonment and emotional detachment by the state. Her account shows a reordering of values, interpretive codes, and collective imaginaries—especially around resilience, citizenship, dignity, and responsibility. She recalls an emotional moment from the early days of the protests: “I remember this moment very clearly: we were on the highway and people had blocked the road, I had just arrived from work, I stopped the car and started to cry, because I felt something for this country that I had not felt for many years. It wasn’t just anger, it was belonging. For the first time, I looked around and saw that we all wanted the same thing: dignity, justice, responsibility. It was overwhelming, and I felt that, finally, we were citizens.” Here, citizenship is not merely formal status or legal rights; it becomes an internalised, visceral experience of being Lebanese, oriented toward collective purpose, shared aspiration, and proactive civic practice. The protests thus function as a cultural event that redefines “belonging” not through state institutions but through embodied responsibility and solidarity.

In this sense, Omar’s and Layla’s accounts align: both illustrate how lived experiences trigger symbolic reconfigurations that yield concrete changes in practice—what Swidler would call recombinations within the cultural toolkit. The density and volatility of the Lebanese semiotic field become evident: concepts such as “democracy,” “freedom,” and “resistance” are not stable referents but are continuously contested and redefined by competing actors.

5.2. From Defensive Ethics to Collective Action: Before/After Repertoires

The interviews also reveal the emergence of new strategies of action. Fouad, an NGO worker, offers a clear periodisation: "Prior to 2019, action was primarily defensive—maintaining personal ethics within a corrupt system and seeking spaces to act without direct confrontation with the state and judicial bodies." After 2019, his strategy shifted toward proactive collective engagement: legal activism, occupation of public space, building political networks, and direct action toward parliament and state bodies. He underscores the radicalisation of his own stance: "I, if necessary and if it ever becomes necessary, would develop the political struggle toward violence to change things. It is shameful that the state treats us like this."

By contrast, Nada, a Sunni schoolteacher from Tripoli in her thirties with a low salary—openly favourable to the protests and very present at al-Nour Square—describes a move from protest to institutional participation, recognising that "real political change must come from within." This turn illustrates the expansion of the toolkit: not only rejecting the system but experimenting with ways to infiltrate and reconfigure it. As she puts it, "It will not happen on its own; they have too much power; we must work from within as the only way to change it." The creation of grassroots structures, such as informal secretariats and new political coalitions, exemplifies how activists adapted to political openings by recombining cultural tools with emergent institutional forms. These strategic shifts underscore Swidler's emphasis on the plasticity of strategies of action in unsettled times and their later reconfiguration. Consequently, new parties and candidates arose, attracting sizeable vote shares across unexpected districts and groups; however, these gains have not yet translated into firm parliamentary entrenchment.

Layla's anecdote about her mother—who began cooking and bringing food to demonstrators—highlights the diffusion of semiotic change beyond those physically present in the squares. For this mother, to protest meant to support protesters materially. Later, Khadija (Layla's mother), a 56-year-old Sunni middle-class woman from Beirut who had lived in Saudi Arabia, told me she had also changed her vote and, despite her sectarian affiliation, supported a candidate who emerged from the 2019 demonstrations. Both Khadija and her daughter Layla reported changing their vote; by contrast, Layla's father—nearing sixty—was more traditionalist, and they were uncertain whether he had made a similar change. Voting change thus extended beyond front-line protesters to broader circles who, while not directly mobilized in the streets, felt interpellated by the semiotic reconfigurations unfolding among Lebanese citizenry.

5.3. Civic Grammars and the Codes of the Possible

The empirical richness of the Lebanese case—and of the 2019 mobilizations as a critical juncture—lies in the visible redefinition of concepts such as "democracy," "citizenship," "freedom," "rule of law," and "resistance," which have become reference points in a new grammar of political belonging, albeit contested by competing actors. This competition persists five years on, as Fouad explains. The state's ever-scarcer and more negligent provision of services forces people to seek private providers for basic goods—such as gas—under acceptable conditions. In practice, citizens must turn to brokers who perform the role of *wasta*; these brokers then claim legitimacy—"See, you complain a lot but we *wasta*

are good; we give you the service"—overlooking the coercive nature of such dependence. Fouad notes the concurrent rise of NGOs that deliberately provide services to circumvent wasta networks, and that "more and more people are taking advantage of them, instead of resorting to a *wasta*." This development accords with Swidler's account of stabilization: new tools enter the cultural repertoire and, even if not always actionable, remain available as recognizable options. Where NGOs are inaccessible, people may still resort to *wasta*, yet the awareness of alternatives marks a shift in the codes of the possible.

Zeinab—a Shia young mother and law student from Nabatieh who participates in the university's legal clinic and engages in activism through digital channels—is discreetly favourable, exercising caution given her family context. She attended marches in Sidon and Beirut and voices a related disillusionment: "It is not a democracy when you have to pay people to vote for you." This articulates the hollowness of certain democratic signifiers in the Lebanese context while signalling normative recalibration. Familiar with international discourse, she names the system a "consociational democracy" and recalls that, during the protests, the term itself was rejected: it felt unacceptable to invoke "democracy" in a country without services, in bankruptcy, and saturated by corruption and nepotism. Nadia expressed a parallel sentiment in interview (echoing Zeinab's verdict), underscoring that this critique was not idiosyncratic but circulated across regions and social worlds. Fouad similarly insists that "resistance" must be civic and inclusive rather than a partisan monopoly, operationalizing this view through NGO work that assists depositors who lost funds amid the pound's devaluation. In Swidlerian terms, such practices indicate selective uptake from the cultural toolkit—within constraints—opening new strategies and perceptions that arose from the 2019 juncture. The window for new ways of thinking and acting remains ajar, even if political circumstances continue to fall far short of protest-era aspirations.

Fouad also observes incremental institutional effects. International bodies—"in particular the United States," in his view—exercise greater oversight over spending and debt which, while far from eliminating mismanagement, has increased governmental awareness of accountability. "At least now they hide a little," he quips. This modest shift has enabled monitoring from within by civic entities and horizontal leaderships that emerged from the protests—practices previously unthinkable and, for many, frightening.

Finally, the movement's refusal to rally behind a single leader and its embrace of "many leaderships" has helped normalize a cultural logic of shared authority and horizontal organization. In semiotic terms, this reorients legitimacy away from sectarian patronage and toward civic participation: joining associations that provide services formerly monopolized by sectarian networks, proactively engaging the state, and demanding accountability. Not all tools forged in 2019 persist, but feasible ones are being routinized, building civic legitimacy through action rather than through "vassalage" to formal authority or *wasta* leaders.

5.4. Repertoires Across Regions and Generations: Narratives, Culture, and Action in Unsettled Times

Moments of rupture are often narrated in highly emotional terms. For many Lebanese, the October 2019 protests are remembered as both extraordinary and fragile. Ali, a 47-year-old Shia secondary-school literature teacher from Nabatieh and father of two, prioritises civic education and public service over *wasta*. He was favourable to the protests but cautious; he provided donations and logistical support to acquaintances who were protesting and attended several marches in Sidon but avoided open confrontation in his hometown to preserve social harmony and his family's safety. Recalling the early days from Nabatieh, he underlines his initial surprise: "I was at home when I saw on television that people were beginning to gather in Beirut. Then Nabatieh followed. It was big—bigger than anything I had seen here." This sense of suddenness aligns with Swidler's notion of unsettled times—periods in which cultural codes become more visible, contested, and subject to reconfiguration.

Repertoires diverge across regions and generations, as in Ali's family. For Ali's children, the protests symbolised boldness and possibility; for him, enthusiasm was quickly eclipsed by fear: "Here in the South, things changed. People were cautious, especially when it was perceived that the protests were directed against Hezbollah." He situates himself differently than young interlocutors in Nabatieh, Beirut, and Tripoli (as seen with Layla and her mother Khadija). For the young, participation often meant reclaiming dignity and visibility; for Ali, abstention was a strategy—choosing survival over confrontation—though his children saw opportunity. He does not deny the need for reforms, but a proximate metanarrative of violence and the influence of Hezbollah heighten his caution. Semiotic frames have shifted, yet risk calculations differ by place and cohort.

Underlying motives—economic collapse, corruption, and service failure—are widely shared, but expressions vary. In Beirut, especially among youth, reform demands directly challenged sectarian arrangements. In Tripoli—economically marginalized and Sunni-majority—protests were intense and oriented toward deep transformation. In the South, proximity to Israel, recent experiences of war, and Hezbollah's political-military centrality fostered greater caution. Residents there rarely reject change outright; rather, they prioritize concrete improvements in services and governance over frontal challenges to sectarian structures. The result is a differentiated political cartography: even where caution prevails, silence gives way to acknowledgment that reform is necessary, albeit voiced with uneven intensity and form.

Maria, Omar, Layla, and Fouad—young, Beirut-based, of different genders and sect backgrounds—often articulated participation through a lexicon of suffocation. As Maria stated: "Because I could no longer breathe. Not only economically, but also morally. We live in fear, in silence. I had to shout." Here, "breathing" functions as a code for freedom and dignity, whereas suffocation signifies moral and civic injury, now articulated through the language of democracy. In the South, Ali invokes reform as well, but with fear and uncertainty: "Fear. We saw videos of people being beaten. Also, I was confused: who leads? What is it they really want?" Conversations with Layla's mother confirm these generational, gendered, and regional tensions: older adults across sects and regions tend to associate protest with risk, while younger generations and many women experience it as a space of liberation and creativity. Courage, dignity, and hope coexist with prudence and fear, yet with a widespread recognition that

change is needed. Swidler's insight is borne out: culture does not dictate uniform action; it offers a repertoire of meanings that actors deploy selectively, given who they are and where they stand.

Although agreement on the need for reform is broad, repertoires of engagement remain divergent. Maria, Layla, Nada, Fouad, Zeinab, and Omar joined marches, chanted, and affiliated with discussion and political groups—expressive practices signalling personal and collective transformation. In the South, older cohorts gravitated toward moderate repertoires: café debates, television monitoring, conversations at home, and lower-visibility participation. "In my area, things can escalate quickly," Ali notes—an articulation of strategic self-preservation rather than apathy.

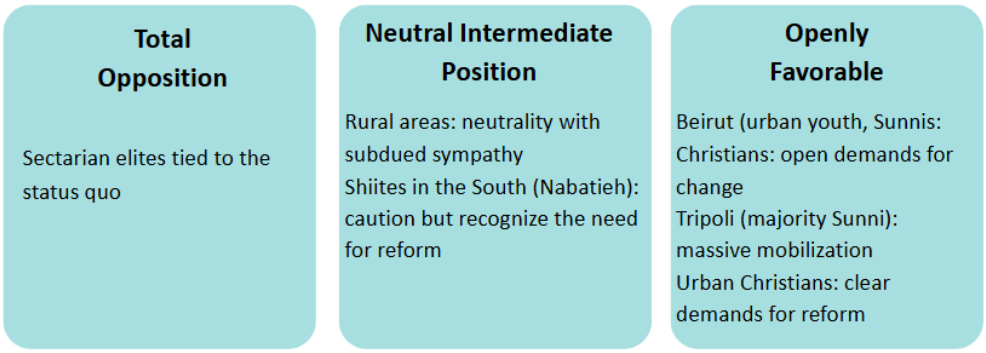
Across testimonies, three main repertoires emerge:

- Active participation: street presence, chanting, feminist organizing, trans-sectarian mobilization.
- Symbolic support: agreement with slogans, domestic debate, social-media sharing with limited street presence.
- Strategic withdrawal: abstention shaped by fear, scepticism, or professional vulnerability (e.g., civil servants).

This last category is Jafar's case—the most cautious among interviewees: a 52-year-old Shia municipal civil servant from Nabatieh who recognized the need for "limited reform" and transparency, yet whose professional responsibilities—ensuring essential services and avoiding politicization that could jeopardize operations or staff—led him to prioritize stability over open confrontation.

Despite such silences—whether associated with the South's caution or civil servants' discretion—no testimony denied the necessity of reform. As Huda, a young Shia woman from Nabatieh training as a nurse, reflected: "Only the elite, the *wasta* families, and those in parliament do not recognize the need for reform. But even they say it is needed. In truth, they resist it, because they do not want to lose their power."

The figure below synthesises this differentiated geography of the 2019 protests and its aftermath. In Beirut and Tripoli, mobilisation was open and massive, particularly among youth, Sunnis, and Christians, employing a language of hope and transformation. In rural and peripheral areas, neutrality prevailed, marked by restrained sympathy, whereas in the Shia South—including Nabatieh—the dominant stance was caution: an acknowledgment of the need for limited, concrete reforms while avoiding direct confrontations with the system, in line with the fears and constraints articulated by Ali, Jafar, or Huda. By contrast, outright opposition concentrated among sectarian elites tied to the status quo. The figure visualizes these three positions—opposition, neutrality, and open support—which, as Swidler suggests, are repertoires deployed according to context, generation, and perceived risk, displaying codes of the possible in practical tool use. A system-wide recognition that reform is necessary now sits inside almost all actors' toolkits.



5.5. Gender and Cultural Cleavages: Agency, Visibility, and the Remaking of Norms

Gendered variation was pronounced and merits sustained attention. “Girls are brave. They break taboos,” Layla observes, pointing to female participation that exceeded conventional expectations and transformed protest spaces into sites of empowerment. This empowerment was not merely symbolic. Women took organizational roles—coordinating marches, staffing first-aid stations, running legal hotlines—and their visibility normalized cross-sectarian collaboration and public voice. Layla’s own account—tears of “belonging” on the highway, “dignity” as practice—travelled within households: her mother’s decision to cook and bring food to demonstrators reframed domestic care as civic engagement. In Nabatieh, women’s visibility was lower, reflecting local constraints and higher perceived risks; yet even there, as Huda noted, young women “break taboos,” suggesting that the grammar of public participation is expanding unevenly.

Intergenerational dynamics intersect with gender. As noted, Layla’s mother embraced change more readily than her father, who was more traditionalist; the protests left a feminist imprint in perception and practice. These shifts modify what is thinkable and sayable about gender, respectability, and public space, even absent institutional reform. At the same time, gendered burdens intensified in the crisis. The ethics of “resilience” were re-signified: “We no longer limit ourselves to surviving; yes, we resist, but not as a gift—now we choose, we say no,” Layla insists. This redefinition makes resilience an active stance of refusal, aligning with a broader shift toward rights-claiming and accountability. In Swidler’s terms, these are not merely beliefs but strategies of action that recalibrate everyday practices (refusing bribes, assisting strangers, speaking up) and extend the repertoire of legitimate female agency in the public sphere.

5.6. Disillusionment and Sedimentation

Disillusionment and frustration form part of the post-2019 landscape. “We got very excited… but then you realize you have no support… That hurts. Now I am more cautious,” Fouad admits. In Swidler’s terms, surface codes produced in unsettled times interact with deeper cultural and institutional strata; altering those strata is slow and reversible. “Some cultural elements generated during unsettled

periods become sedimented in enduring institutions or habits; others disappear" (Swidler 2001: 62–65, 71). The testimonies show both selection and erosion: some tools enter routine practice; others remain inexecutable given institutional resistance and basic needs. Crucially, unused codes persist as possible futures.

Fouad's self-correction crystallises this dynamic: "Maybe we should not only defend ourselves from the system; maybe we can begin to build something in parallel, something better." Nadine, finishing psychology at the Lebanese International University and posting poetry online, notes the erosion of activist energy and the loss of talent: "Since after 2019… everything stopped… we have lost a lot of talent. They left the country." Yet she continues to "follow many activists online... because I do not think sectarianism serves to move toward a political system where we have rights and services." Layla's critique of romanticized "resilience"—"now we choose, we say no"—and her recollection of becoming "a community" ("We are no longer just individuals") underscore protest as a laboratory of new cultural meanings. Finally, dignity becomes practice: "We wanted to live with dignity—not just survive… when we refuse to pay bribes… when we raise our voice even if no one listens. Dignity has become a practice." These are cultivated strategies rooted in a reorganized toolkit.

6. Conclusion

The 2019 Lebanese protests resist classification as simple success or failure. Read through Swidler's culture-in-action framework, they appear as an unsettled period in which previously sedimented cultural codes became visible, malleable, actionable, and open to transformation. Across the testimonies, we observe semiotic inversions, recomposed repertoires, and a redefinition of the codes of the possible—all of which continue to contour civic life even as formal politics has stalled. In parallel, the evidence also corroborates Swidler's caution: cultural change is non-linear, unevenly sedimented, and constantly negotiated under constraint.

- **Semiotic inversion and civic reorientation**

Idioms of sectarian protection and "national resistance" were recoded as signs of systemic neglect and a failed state—from Maria's "*We are victims of a negligent state*," to Layla's redefinition of "resilience," to Omar's observation that "*everyone agrees*" the system has failed. This inversion relocates responsibility to law and the state, enabling a diffusion of rights-based and accountability talk—"*I have rights. This is illegal. I will take it to court*"—and reframes belonging: from sectarian inclusion to shared citizenship ("*finally, we were citizens*"). Crucially, the new imaginary travels beyond the square (e.g., Layla's mother cooking for protesters; Khadija's vote switch), showing how lived experience triggers symbolic reconfiguration and concrete political change.

- **Recomposition of repertoires across regions, generations, and gender**

Before 2019, defensive ethics and low-visibility endurance predominated; after 2019, many experimented with collective, networked strategies—legal activism, public-space occupation, horizontal coalitions. Regional and generational ecologies set different risk thresholds and visibility (Ali's strategic abstention in Nabatieh vs. his children's enthusiasm; Maria's "*I had to shout*"). Gendered agency expanded: women broke taboos, took organisational roles, and reframed domestic care as civic participation. "Resilience" was reconceived as refusal and rights-claiming. These shifts

crystallised into shared but heterogeneous grammars of action—active participation, symbolic support, and strategic withdrawal—each drawn selectively from a broadened toolkit.

The codes of the possible: institutional friction and partial sedimentation

Material constraints (service collapse) sustain *wasta* dependence even as NGOs opened alternative channels—"*more and more people are taking advantage of them*." Democratic discourse circulated domestically (intergenerational debate, scrutiny of programmes), despite persistent sectarian voting (as Ali admits). International oversight increased ("*At least now they hide a little*"), creating modest space for monitoring from within. As Swidler predicts, not all elements sediment: some erode or are co-opted; others endure as latent resources awaiting more favourable conjunctures. Still, the cultural window opened in 2019 remains ajar: new words (rights, dignity, accountability), new alliances (horizontal leaderships), and new refusals (anti-bribery, anti-clientelism) structure the everyday ethics of citizenship even as political structures lag.

Rethinking political change through cultural repertoires

The Lebanese case demonstrates that political transformation cannot be understood without attending to the semiotic codes, symbolic resources, and cultural strategies that shape action and meaning. Culture is not a static "background"; it is an active repertoire that people mobilise, reconfigure, and sometimes sediment in moments of disruption. Tools once confined to professional/private domains—legal reasoning, civic education, horizontal organising—were redeployed as strategies of resistance and reimagination. The aftermath confirms the non-linearity of cultural change: institutional resistance, inertia, and socio-economic exhaustion neutralised part of the innovation, while clientelist narratives reasserted themselves through the logic of necessity, with sectarian actors reappearing as service providers. Where new tools lacked scaffolding (economic, institutional, social), they struggled to sediment; yet retreat from the streets did not erase transformation. Instead, we see partial sedimentation and reconfigured moral grammars—micro-practices such as refusing bribes, joining civic groups, and invoking rights—indicating that protest culture permeated deeper strata of habit and interpretation. Layla's "dignity" exemplifies this: no longer merely a slogan, it became a performative principle organising daily ethical decisions.

These findings reinforce a broader theoretical claim: rationalist and structuralist models that ignore the symbolic and interpretive dimensions of politics miss how actors actually navigate crisis. Individuals do not act solely from interests or fixed ideologies; they work with unequally distributed, sometimes ambivalent cultural tools, chosen for plausibility, resonance, and sustainability within asymmetrical fields of power and decay. Political culture thus appears as a terrain of struggle where strategies are tested, adopted, or abandoned—and where what is thinkable, sayable, and doable is itself remade.

In sum, what was learned in 2019 has not been unlearned. The semiotic inversions and recomposed repertoires identified here already reorganise the horizon of possibility in post-2019 Lebanon. Whether they crystallise into durable institutional change will depend on subsequent conjunctures; analytically, however, they have redrawn the moral and political coordinates within which Lebanese citizens live, choose, and contest.

A key policy recommendation for EU policymakers derived from applying Culture in Action to the political analysis of democratising societies is to engage not only with institutions but also with the

cultural repertoires through which Lebanese actors interpret crises, coordinate collective action, and hold authority accountable. External partners should therefore complement institutional instruments with repertoire-sensitive support that strengthens dignity, accountability, and citizenship while avoiding the reproduction of clientelist logics. Such engagement strengthens Lebanese civic agency and contributes to regional stability by investing in the long-term infrastructures of democracy, not merely the short-term management of crisis.

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