

Universality and the Postcolonial City: Beirut, the City of Law, and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon

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On May 17, 2009, Audette Salem was run over by a car near the UN ESCWA building in Beirut where she had been encamped for the previous four years, pleading for an investigation into the disappearance of her children in 1985. Her tragic story of injustice echoes Kafka's story 'Before the Law' in which a man arrives in the city to plead for justice but never gets access to the courthouse.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon was established by UN Security Council resolution 1757 on 30 May 2007 to investigate the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, as well as a string of other high-profile assassinations. It was established under Chapter VII of the UN Charter whereby the Security Council may intervene "to maintain or restore international peace and security." The arrival of international law in this form promised the arrival of law as an abstract, universal force. However, the very formation of it under Chapter VII underlined the deep structural problems of instantiating universality within the mechanisms of national sovereignty and international intervention. If a colonial axis ran through the formation of the Tribunal, then it is interesting to recall that Beirut was once home to a Roman university of law – an outpost of the Eternal City, and a node in its imperial promulgation of law.

The paper will examine the complex relation between universality and particularity in a postcolonial city such as Beirut, but without simply taking out an injunction against universality in the name of particularity. The question of universality and its relation to cities and law has too long a history – Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, Geneva, New York, the Hague, to name just the so-called western tradition, to which one could add Mecca, among others – to dismiss it so quickly. The key questions of the paper will be: what pathways are created or can be created between universality and particularity? And might such pathways be evaluated as more or less ethical? In more concrete terms, as universality is discredited as an alibi for neo-colonialism deployed by the US and the international community, what future does it have? Rather than simply accepting an irreparable rupture between the universal and the particular, the paper will follow Derrida's reading of Kafka's 'Before the Law' in exploring the city and the law for what they might suggest of the connections – the complex roadways – between universality and particularity.