Week 2: Political-Economic Readings

David Harvey’s article reminded me of a space in Beirut which until 4 months ago was a place that stressed differences, enforced stereotypes and political seclusion. “Horsh Beirut” is the only green space left in Beirut, it has a diversity of flaura and fauna, walking, running and cycling paths, green grass for picnic and other open-air activities. Despite of being reserved and built for the public during the French mandate, for a few decades, until this August-September, it was restricted to Lebanese citizens. The claims given as explanations were that if it would have been open to the public, people would go there and “misbehave”, pollute, and harm the only left green space of the city. However, ironically, blond people or “European-looking” people were allowed to use the space. This is a very good example of the political aspect of a place. According to the Lebanese state, the park did not seem to be “authentic” to the Lebanese community and so it was only maintained as a symbol of the “civilized Beirut”. The space had the power to differentiate people. However, the cultural mass did not imagine this space as such, so started rallying for it to be reopened to the public. After multiple protests, activist events, letters addressed to the government and the municipality, finally the park was reopened to the Lebanese community. We cannot explain the dynamics related to this space if we do not adopt the perspective of political-economic and cultural politics that Harvey proposes. However, what I noticed here was that state politics was much more involved in this than economics. Although if we consider this issue as an implication of imperialist ideas that favor “Europeans” over local Lebanese people, we can say that the problem goes back to imperial-capitalist tendencies. But there were no direct economic explanations to the issue at hand. So I think it would be interesting to also interpret Harvey’s argument in terms of state politics.

Gordon Mathews’ ethnography was very helpful in illustrating the relation between the microscopic and the macroscopic more understandable. Chungking Mansions is an example of a place where the social relationships and the global political-economic forces mingle. If we try to explain the lives of the people frequenting Chungking Mansions without considering the political economic factors that lead them there, play with their choices and transform their lives, the image of the place we form will be incomplete. Similarly, we cannot explain globalization, changing identities, world systems, without examining the social relations of the people who live in places that are characterized by such trends. Chungking Mansions is a place defined by the people, commodities, expectations, experiences; but also defining the people’s lives and futures. The power, hence, works in both ways. And I wonder on which scope should one work in order to advance a change in global systems. Would it be easier to start a change in the global market by transforming social relations, or to campaign for transformations in political and economic ideologies?