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CULTURE REVIEW

On Not Being on The Brink of The Abyss

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This is a translation of a piece I've written in Arabic. I don't usually write in Arabic and because of that it takes me a long time to do so. But I wanted to write this in Arabic because it is an offering and a 'thank you' to those Lebanese people who gave me the experience of an uprising while in Lebanon this October 2019.

There is something new developing on the ground in Lebanon. To understand its newness and ramifications we have to understand the old. Since I was a child Lebanon has continuously moved from one crisis to another. I was born in 1957 and no sooner had I started breathing than I was in the thick of the 1958 civil war. Since that time crises have never stopped.

What distinguishes the Lebanese crises from others is that every time there is a crisis we get an assortment of people, politicians, journalists and intellectuals, trying to convince us that 'the crisis is particularly severe' and 'we are on the brink of the abyss'. Then, as we move from one old crisis to a new one, sometimes those same people come back and tell us, that this time it's really different, and the crisis is really particularly severe' and 'we are genuinely on the brink of the abyss.'

Even in the days of the Civil War, when we were in what one would think right 'in the middle of the abyss' there were people who were saying 'There's a far greater abyss, and we need to pay attention, because this time we are really really really, 'on the brink of the abyss'. After the war, in much the same way, we kept moving from one brink of the abyss to another.

Imagining political, economic and even environmental crises as always putting us on the brink, creates a climate and a political culture in which the future is difficult to think creatively. A country 'on the brink' is like a seriously ill patient in hospital, someone deemed to be 'in a critical condition'. We do not sit in an intensive care ward with such a patient and talk to her about future projects. All we wish for her is to manage to stay alive and get better. In Lebanon, too, thanks to our own perception of being continuously on the verge of a precipice, we have

been lacking in new future-directed political thought. All we do is wake up in the morning and congratulate ourselves: “Unbelievable! We have not completely disintegrated yet. Thank God for that.”

That is why we can consider that this kind of thinking that always puts us before the brink of the abyss, and all ideas that position us before an imagined imminent catastrophe, as a governmental technique aimed at restraining the political imagination and limiting our capacity for thinking different radical futures. The notion of ‘existential danger’ in Israel, for example, plays the same role in impoverishing political culture and preventing the emergence of any thought that expresses the possibility of radical or even minor social change. We see something similar in the cultures of Lebanese political parties, especially that of Hezbollah. All this to draw attention to the crisis associated with the Lebanese uprising today. Instead of a crisis that one finds oneself in against one’s will and that is moved by forces beyond one’s control, here we have a crisis that the Lebanese people have created and brought about themselves. And indeed, the most important characteristic of this crisis is that, precisely, it does not put us on the brink of the abyss, and it does not curb our political imagination. Quite the contrary, the uprising has been a festival of social, cultural and political creativity that is continuously opening up new political horizons. Even if they cannot achieve anything else, we must be eternally grateful to the heroes of the October 17 uprising for having freed our political imagination, even if for a short time, from the nightmare of the ‘brink of the abyss’.