LSE Middle East Centre

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POPULAR MOBILISATION IN THE MENA

THEORISING REVOLUTION

APPREHENDING CIVIL WAR

LEFTIST POLITICAL PRACTICE AND ANALYSIS IN LEBANON 1969-79

Fadi Bardawil

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Theorising Revolution, Apprehending Civil War: Leftist Political Practice and Analysis in Lebanon (1969–79)

Fadi Bardawil

About the Author

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Abstract

In the wake of the Arab popular uprisings, this short piece revisits the thought of an earlier generation of revolutionaries. Unlike those today, who are united by the desire to overthrow authoritarian regimes but who come from competing ideological universes and conceptions of the political, this earlier generation of militants grounded political practice in a thick Marxist theoretical language. This paper focuses on the writings of Waddah Charara as well as the Marxist tradition of thought at the beginning of the Lebanese civil and regional wars (1975–1990). It highlights how Charara's analysis rethought the question of power away from class politics in the wake of his diagnosis of the failure of hegemony in Lebanon.

Prelude

The Arab popular uprisings put the question of emancipation back at the heart of our present. Rebellions against authoritarian regimes, against the sectarian or ethnic dividing of populations, and against military and economic intervention by external actors all contribute to render the question of freedom and its complications more urgent. This paper revisits the thought of an earlier generation of revolutionaries who grew up in the wake of the Palestininian Nakba (1948) and during the high tide of Nasser's anti-colonial nationalism to become, by the 1960s, critics of Arab nationalism and pro-western Arab governments. Unlike today's revolutionaries, who are united by the desire to overthrow the regimes but come from competing ideological universes and conceptions of the political, this earlier generation of leftist militants grounded political practice in a thick Marxist theoretical language. Lenin's adage, 'without revolutionary theory there is no revolutionary practice', rang truer than ever in the ears of those who were attuned to the unfolding global events in China, Cuba and Vietnam, as well as to the workers' and students' strikes in Europe.

This paper focuses on Waddah Charara's (1942–) revolutionary writings of the late 1960s, and those written after his exit from political practice, as well as the Marxist tradition of thought at the beginning of the Lebanese civil and regional wars (1975–1990). Charara was a major theorist of the Lebanese New Left in the 1960s and early 1970s, who, with Fawwaz Traboulsi, co-founded the Marxist organisation Socialist Lebanon (Lubnān al-Ishtirakī) (1964–1970) that later merged with the Organisation of Lebanese Socialists (Munẓama al-Ishterakīyyīn al-Lubnānīyyīn) to found the Organisation of Communist Action in Lebanon (Munẓama al-'Amal al-Shuyū'ī fī Lubnān) (1971–). This organisation played a pivotal role in the Lebanese National Movement, the coalition of leftist and pan-Arab parties, in the first years of the Lebanese wars. The paper highlights how Charara's analysis rethought the question of power away from class politics in the wake of his diagnosis of the failure of hegemony in Lebanon.

In reopening this rarely examined archive of these older generation militants, revisiting their revolutionary hopes and subsequent disenchantments, and unearthing the theoretical infrastructure of their thought and political prognoses, we do not collapse the distance between their past and our present, nor do we retrospectively judge whether they were right or wrong in their analyses and political wagers. In revisiting the critical and political labours of this earlier generation, sketching how the question of freedom was posed and in what way politics was conceived, this paper will reconstruct their questions and answers as an antidote to public amnesia, to recover the modes of social criticism and the visions of emancipation which animated previous generations of thinkers and militants.

Two Resistances: The Palestinian and the Lebanese

On the pages of their underground mimeographed bulletin, Socialist Lebanon gave a leftist critique of both pro-Soviet communist parties, such as the Lebanese Communist Party (Parti Communiste Libanais) (1924) – via a Marxian *retour aux sources* that undercut the Soviet mediators – and the national liberation, progressive regimes of the mid-1960s. Marginal at first, Socialist Lebanon's critique was catapulted into the limelight in the aftermath of the 1967 military defeat of the Arab regimes against Israel, which witnessed the conversion of many Arab nationalists to Marxism. It was at this time, which was characterised by the rising star of the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon, the eclipse of nationalist progressive regimes and the adoption of Marxism Leninism by previously Arab nationalist allies of President Nasser, that Socialist Lebanon saw their historical chance.[1]

'The ruling Lebanese interests cannot acknowledge the links that tie its farmhouse, Lebanon, to the region's causes', wrote the anonymous author of 'Two Resistances: The Palestinian and the Lebanese', a central piece which captures the height of Socialist Lebanon's activist fervour in 1969 and its theorisation of the impact of the new revolutionary agent, the Palestinian resistance, on Lebanon and the surrounding Arab countries.[2] The long, sophisticated and scathing article towards Lebanese nationalists and authorities located the Palestinian resistance as the external revolutionary agent, which would detonate the contradictions of the Lebanese system. 'The Lebanese position', wrote Charara, 'i.e. the authorities' position, is clear, Lebanon is of the Arab region: its economy and the prosperity of its financiers and merchants rise on the role they play in that region. Lebanon, however, is on the margin of the Arab region when it comes to political problems threatening to destabilise those who rule it.' 'The Lebanese entity', continued Socialist Lebanon's major theorist contemptuously, 'is the fortified haven for the domination of a financial–commercial bourgeoisie that would not have existed if not for the role it plays in the imperialist pillage operation of the Arab region.'[3]

The diagnosis put forth in 1969 was a strong indictment of the Lebanese nationalist politics of neutrality in the Arab–Israeli conflict, and of the country's laissez-faire capitalist system. This was a politics that sought, at one and the same time, to be fully economically

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[1] See Walid Kazziha, *Revolutionary Transformation in the Arab World: Habash and his Comrades from Nationalism to Communism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975) and Samir Kassir, *The War of Lebanon: On National Dissension and Regional Conflict* [La Guerre du Liban: De la Dissension Nationale au Conflit Régional 1975–82], (Karthala: Paris, 1994).

[2] 'Two Resistances: The Palestinian and the Lebanese', *Socialist Lebanon* 16, (September 1969). All further citations unless indicated otherwise are from this source. The author's research indicates that Waddah Charara is the author of this key piece, along with some his other comrades at the time. Specific members of Socialist Lebanon wrote the bulletin's articles, but none of them were signed. The Marxist organisation subscribed to a collectivist ethos which was shown by assigning the authorship of texts the organisation itself.

[3] 'The entity', as in the Lebanese entity, is a designation used pejoratively by political commentators and actors wishing not to bestow legitimacy and recognition. Israel, for example, is sometimes referred to as the Zionist entity, while fervent Syrian nationalists refer to Lebanon as the Lebanese entity.

integrated in the region as the link between imperialist markets and Arab ones, and to isolate itself from the region's politics. It was into this situation, characterised by Lebanese economic integration in, and political isolation from, the Arab world, that the Palestinian resistance would make its entrance. The Palestinian revolution in the fall of 1969 constituted a contradiction to Lebanon's political isolation, a breach of 'Lebanon's political fort', which was under the illusion of being able to live isolated from the region's cardinal events. The Palestinian resistance unmasked the real face of the Lebanese regime, for 'how can a rule that plays the role of the watchdog of imperialist dependence agitate an entire people for a national battle?' and how can the Lebanese system, which survives on the remains of imperial interests, go through this battle that will put its banks, agents, and summer resorts in danger?' asked the author. More importantly, the Palestinian resistance, according to Charara's 1969 prognosis, would be able to transcend the sectarian allegiances of the Lebanese, first because

> The public that fought the battle in 1958 fought it with loyalty to the feudal lords, [and] a sectarian, familial, local loyalty that was enhanced by their representing a Nasserite, Arabist tendency. While the [current] rallying around the Palestinian resistance rises on the remains of that loyalty… and we have seen this same public on 23 April shouting expletives in the faces of its traditional leaders from Yafi, to Hakim, to Hassan Khaled…

> The event in itself carries a potential that allows, and this has been proven, the breaking of traditional sectarian loyalties, transforming them into national loyalties, that will fragment the base of the sectarian Right whatever the sect it belongs to. Does the fact that the main transformation is happening amongst Muslims lessen its value? Not at all. The sectarian knot is not solved in one go, and if the entry point to its dissolution is revealing the conflict [i.e. its political nature] on the Muslim level, the next level would certainly reveal its true nature when the Muslim Right finds its natural ally in the Christian right.

The radicalisation of Muslim public opinion embracing the resistance and insulting its traditional political leaders, such as Hassan Khaled, the grand Mufti of Lebanon, in the large demonstrations in support of Palestinians on 23 April 1969, during which the Lebanese army opened fire, killing and wounding a number of protesters, led Charara to be hopeful about the role the Palestinian detonator was playing in revealing to the masses the true political nature of the conflict. As they began to be interpellated by the national question, the masses were breaking free from their traditional leaders. This contrasted with the case of the 1958 Civil War, which rested on sectarian–familial–local loyalties propagated by Nasser's Arab nationalist ideology. The Palestinian agent, which acted as a solvent of sectarian loyalties and contributed to a rearticulation of politics along national lines, was enhanced by a second factor, since

> The conflict does not take place on the closed internal level. The factor that is detonating it is not 'Lebanese'… It is far more reaching, and it shall extract the conflict from its 'Lebaneseness' – i.e. from its specificity, and hence its sectarian nature – to posit it on the level of the whole region. And therefore the poles of the

ruling alliances can no longer contain it within the sectarian frame because it re-
veals their common positions despite their different sects. And this position is not
only in contradiction with the continuity of the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon
but also with the rest of the Arab people on which the Lebanese bourgeoisie relies
to assure its continuity by living off it and cashing commissions on its account.

The Palestinian resistance *qua* external Arab agent, 'the detonator of the contradictions
of the whole Arab situation', by transcending the sectarian frame which organised Leb-
anese politics, brought to light the more fundamental ground of agreement between the
Christian and Muslim bourgeoisies. The Palestinian revolution would neutralise the bour-
geoisie's sectarian tricks and defences, revealing that the heart of its politics was 'interest
based and political and can no longer veil itself with sectarianism'.

'These last two factors', wrote Charara in the conclusion to 'Two Resistances', 'in addi-
tion to the perseverance of the Left in clarifying the reality of the conflict, do not result
in avoiding conflict if the Right wants to push for it – but are amenable to transforming
it from a sectarian conflict into a civil war.' He continued by mentioning the 'price' this
revolutionising of the Lebanese polity would exact, 'if democratic national rule cannot
be reached without a civil war, the 'real coordination' with *fedaʾi* action cannot [also] take
place without exposing the southern region to an Israeli invasion.'

Charara's 1969 prognosis was right in predicting the coming conflict and wrong in pre-
dicting its nature. Six years later, a civil war would erupt, splitting the country along
sectarian lines. Nine years later (in 1978), Israel's army would invade southern Leba-
non, succeeding in pushing the Palestine Liberation Organisation and leftist militants
away from Israel's northern borders. The years leading to the 1975 war would witness a
number of splits and expulsions from the young Organisation of Communist Action in
Lebanon, including Waddah Charara, who headed a large internal opposition movement
along Maoist lines in 1973. Charara stopped any militant activity at the beginning of the
Civil War in 1975. His rich militant life spanned the fragile years of civil peace between
the 1958 Civil War and the 1975 one. Fawwaz Traboulsi, Socialist Lebanon's co-founder,
would go to the front in 1975, exiting militant life in the mid-1980s in the aftermath of
the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. But in 1969, it was still their historical chance.

Exit Marx, Enter Ibn Khaldun

Ten years after writing 'Two Resistances,' the blurb on the back of Charara's *Wars of
Subjugation: Lebanon the Permanent Civil War*,[4] a collection of previously published essays,
introduced the volume as follows:

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4   Waddah Charara, *Wars of Subjugation: Lebanon, the Permanent Civil War* [Ḥurūb al-Istitbaʾ, Lubnān
al-Ḥarb al-Ahliyya al-Dāʾima] (Bayrūt: Dār al-Taliʿa, 1979) I will refer to the book as *Wars of Subjugation*.
The book is a collection of essays published in between the autumn of 1974 and the winter of 1976.

> Contemporary Arab political thought has turned to – often through Marxism and Leninism – ideas and concepts that have formed its implicit and direct focal points. And it has formulated the issues of Arab societies and their problems in the mold of these ideas and concepts: The – unified – state, the dominant or hegemonic class, the unified political society, the dominant ideology, political and social democracy...

However, this mould has overlooked the socio-political fabric of domination and power in our societies. It treated the matter theoretically and practically as if it rested on hegemony or on national–popular unity.

The blurb could be read as an *autocritique*, after a major theorist of the Lebanese New Left exited from political militancy in the first few months of the Lebanese civil and regional wars.[5] In the essays collected in *Wars of Subjugation*, Charara announced the moral bankruptcy of different explanations and justifications used by different warring parties regarding the atrocities committed in the first months of the 1975 Civil War, notably those put forward by the Left. The political crisis also heralded an epistemological one, during which he sought to understand the new practices ushered in by the war and their relations to the Marxist analysis adopted by the Lebanese Left. Charara's main analytical move was to rethink the modality of power at work in Lebanese society in order to understand the sectarian Christian–Muslim sundering of the Lebanese masses and the pillaging, deface-ment and destruction that accompanied the fighting.

During these civil wars, none of the warring sides attempted, wrote Charara, to 'win over elements from the opposing side'.

> There is no doubt that all sides were declaring their concern about 'unity': Leba-non's unity, the unity of the Lebanese [power-sharing] formula, the unity of the Lebanese people... however what stood out in these positions was the incapacity to practice a politics of unity that does not practically and on the ground conse-crate a shift in the factional balance (namely the sectarian).[6]

The inability of any one of the warring sides to interpellate individuals from the other side, as well as the gap between the discourse on unity on the one hand and the inability of this discourse to be translated into reality on the other, was related to the failure of hegemony. I quote at length Charara's departure from Marxist analysis in his examination of the Lebanese social fabric and its dominant modality of power:

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[5] The 'Black Saturday' massacre took place on 6 December 1975, when, after discovering the bodies of four young men associated with the right wing Phalangist Party, the Christian militia men established checkpoints in Beirut, stopping cars, lining up and murdering 'some 200 innocent Muslims, mostly port workers.' On 18 January 1976, the Christian forces attacked Karantina, a north-eastern multi-ethnic (Kurds and Armenians), multi-national (Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese) and predominantly Muslim working class suburb of Beirut under the control of the PLO. After conquering the slum hundreds of civilians were massacred. Two days later, the National Movement and Palestinian forces, in reprisal for the Karantina massacre, attacked the Christian coastal town of Damur south of Beirut, killing around three hundred and fifty Christians.

[6] *Wars of Subjugation*, p. 233.

For power does not work (for reasons we will elucidate) on generalising a set of unified organisational and ideological criteria that cover the social networks of the country: production and educational networks as well as the political one… Rather, at the origin of current power and social relations is a consecration of the independence of intertwined units that share, amongst what else they share, power itself. And this distribution does not work in a unified political sphere that possesses a common fabric and rests on the triumph of a socio-historical axis. For distribution rests on the multiplicity of political spheres, 'common' fabrics, and dominant axes. From the politics of the family, to the politics of the sect, from the politics of the profession to the politics of the region, and from the politics of the political party to the politics of the Arab axes, we do not just move from one formation to another, and it is not the numerical scale or the material support that is altered. What changes are the codes of internal relations and the rules of hierarchy and its matter. For kinship does not rely on the same ground as the position vis-à-vis production and distribution relies on, and the political party establishes relationships of force that are in disagreement with the balance of loyalties in the region, and the relationships between sects is stabilised on a rule that is different from the Arab balance of power, etc. The difference of criteria and their variety (despite the intertwinement of some of them) raises difficult obstacles in the face of power as hegemony and not dominance. While hegemony presupposes a general political and ideological leadership that supplies the administrative and professional one with all encompassing organisational criteria that conceal the basis of power, dominance contents itself with an external possession of instruments of power: armed forces, administrative apparatuses and a share of production. And as much as hegemony is enriched with a social content, the chances of resorting daily to direct domination and its instruments is diminished. And as much as the social content of domination becomes thinner, the necessity of using armed forces, administrative techniques, and the direct possession of a sample of production is increased. In the last case, power takes a form that Ibn Khaldun knew perfectly, that of *iltiḥām*[7] (fusion) and *istitba'*[8] (subjugation).

In the first few months of the war, Charara began rethinking the categories through which the political ought to be apprehended in Lebanon, marginalising the ideological discourse of Left and Right, and emphasising the modalities of power and social relations that characterised his society. This failure of a unified hegemonic power in the Lebanese context that overcame the multiplicity of 'infra-national' – family, sect and regional – loyalties of people resulted in Charara's analysis of the practice of power as dominance.

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[7]   Rosenthal, the translator of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, renders '*Iltiḥām*' as close contact, and '*Istitba*'' as 'subservience', see Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Franz Rosenthal (trans), (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989 [1967]). I am translating '*Iltiḥām*' as 'fusion'. '*Istitba*'' will be translated as 'subjugation' as suggested by Waddah Charara.

[8]   Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 108: 'Even if an individual tribe has different 'houses' and many diverse group feelings, still, there must exist a group feeling that is stronger than all the other group feelings combined that is superior to them all and makes them subservient, and in which all the diverse group feelings coalesce, as it were, to become one greater group feeling.'

This external modality of power at work in Lebanese society, a 'formal dominance', as Charara dubbed it, did not seek to rework the internal social bonds of the group it dominated, to impose its own ideology on it, or to fashion new subjectivities, but rather was content with subjugating it while leaving its internal relations, hierarchies and codes intact.

Gramsci's elaboration of his conceptual arsenal – comprising hegemony, historical block, war of position and war of manoeuvre – took place in the wake of the failure of socialist revolutions in Western Europe in the 1920s. His critique of 'economism', by turning his analytical gaze to the political and ideological terrains and investigating the relationship between hegemony (consent) and domination (force), was an attempt to understand capitalist societies' sources of resilience.[9] The Lebanese Civil War of 1975, which resulted in the fragmentation of Lebanese state and society, was in a way the obverse of a society's resilience to revolutionary transformation as a result of the moral and intellectual leadership of its dominant class. Charara's argument about multiple foci and modalities of power that foreclose the possibility of class hegemony was not a return to a theory of essentialist culturalist attributes of Arab societies, nor a historicist move emphasising the persistence of pre-capitalist remainders in the present. His diagnosis put the emphasis on how these modalities of power and loyalties are modernity's offspring:

> Sectarianism, familialism and regionalism were not the 'remainders' of pre-capitalist social relations. And while all of them were based on elements that predate capitalism, they only rose to prominence in organising social and political life inside the movement of capitalist expansion one the one hand, and inside the formation of the Lebanese state with its frontiers, administration and hierarchies on the other hand.[10]

A Dissolutioned Left

The failure to produce autonomous individuals that broke away from regional, familial and sectarian circles of belonging, and the discovery that the 'Lebanese citizen' did not exist, marginalised for Charara the leftist ideology that posited an opposition of masses to bourgeoisie, or of left-wing citizens against right-wing. This left him very critical of his ex-comrades. Leftist discourse was incongruent with facts on the ground, such as the sectarian massacres and the division of fighters into more or less Christian and Muslim blocks. Leftist political practice for Charara was also guilty of not attempting to break away from these modalities of power by 'propagating political and ideological criteria that form the content of a different power'.[11] This gap within the ideological political line – with its anti-imperial content on the one hand and its practices, modes of operation and forms of mobilisation on the other, and which led Charara away from the first

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[9] David Forgacs (ed), *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
[10] Charara, *Wars of Subjugation*, p. 250. Nancy Gallagher (ed), *Approaches to the History of the Middle East: Interviews with Leading Middle East Historians* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994), p. 33.
[11] Charara, *Wars of Subjugation*, pp. 233–4.

and into a theorisation of the second – was first noted by the militant intellectual in a comment, at the height of the activist fervour of Socialist Lebanon, in a sequel article to 'Two Resistances: The Palestinian and the Lebanese' (Part II) written in March 1970. In a very early moment of doubt regarding the revolutionary potential of the Palestinian resistance, which he had theorised in the earlier article of September 1969, Charara noted the rupture between the resistance's supposed efficiency as a detonator of Lebanese contradictions and its work with 'traditional political actors', as opposed to acting on a mass political level. He wrote in 1970, 'And the resistance was not a stranger to all of these phenomena: it supplied them [the traditional forces that rise on personal, familial, regional loyalties] with material means, and nourished them with men sometimes, and in all considered this a sound phenomena to which it had no objection.'[12]

Leftist parties did not attack the root of the problem – social solidarity in Lebanese society – and did not attempt to rearticulate the social bond in a different way. So while they talked about the masses, the political translation on the ground was always going to be weighed in the Christian/Muslim balance of power. This was owing to the gap between the revolutionary ideology of the battle and the actual sectarian power practices which worked according to the logic of subjugation. This dissonance was translated into the lingo of foreign reporters in the first years of the war, who called the warring parties 'Islamo-progressives' and 'Christian-conservatives'. While Traboulsi adhered to the Progressive/Conservative divide, fighting alongside the Left, Charara, his comrade for the last decade, withdrew from political engagement as soon as the war began, finding it impossible to identify with any of the warring parties, and deeming the Muslim/Christian divide and other regional or familial dividing loyalties as more consequential to the unfolding of events than the different ideological banners under which the parties were fighting.

Waddah Charara's withdrawal from political practice in the first months of the war and the critical distance he took from both camps was a very rare move at the time. With the waning power of the Left in the following years of the war, the defeat of the PLO after the Israeli invasion of 1982, the increasingly inter- and intra-sectarian nature of the war, and the rise of Islamist political forces, a number of leftist militants would experience similar disenchantment, coming to occupy a position which is at once critical of the anti-imperial political rhetoric which hangs all the ills of Arab societies on external enemies, and of the regional, familial, and sectarian structures of their societies.

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[12] *Socialist Lebanon* 17, March 1970.

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