

Reading Marx in Beirut: Disorganised Study and the Politics of Queer Utopia

Sophie Chamas

This article draws on ethnographic research carried out with Marxist reading groups run by a Lebanese revolutionary socialist organization. I examine the labor that Marxist theoretical practice was doing in a political conjuncture widely viewed as *post-Marxist*, discussing the relationship between theory and affect, and the role that affective infrastructures play in maintaining and reproducing social movements and political organisations. Drawing on Moten and Harney, I frame this intellectual labor as a form of *dissonant, disorganized study* - a mode of preparing for revolution by being together in *brokenness* and routinely generating a commitment to a particular political horizon. This form of political praxis as study unfolded within a

Lebanese activist scene dominated by a pragmatic conception of politics, within which the critical labor of the radical and revolutionary left was largely considered *sterile*, mired in something akin to what Berlant calls cruel optimism. Drawing on Munoz, his conceptualisation of the politics of queer utopia, and his defence of utopian imaginativeness, I argue that for radical and revolutionary leftists in counter-revolutionary times, cultivating solidarity and camaraderie by maintaining a space of study that could enable technologies of both self and collective constituted a *productive* political act.

Keywords: Lebanon; leftism; Marxism; utopia; queerness; study

When I carried out the fieldwork that would inform this paper, the Middle East was mired in a post-revolutionary context where emboldened authoritarian regimes had suffocated activist energies. At the time, activists all over the region had found themselves in a moment of retreat from the street.

I carried out fieldwork in Beirut between the summers of 2016 and 2018, amongst independent activists contending with the aftermath of the 2015 garbage protests - a political event that participants saw as charged with potentiality, but that quickly fizzled out, stranding them in a post-evental moment of *dead time* heavy with the debilitating sense of having yet again failed to facilitate transformative change (Jeffrey xv).¹

I spent my time in Beirut amongst activists attempting to make sense of, work within and against, what many were experiencing as a conjuncture of "stuckedness" (Hage, "Alter-Politics", ch. 2). My interlocutors spoke in terms of what felt possible before, during and after the *Hirak*, as it was locally known, and described their political work as characterised by the routinisation of failure - an experience that had imposed debilitating, depressive disposi-

tions against which they had to constantly fight to persist as activists.

In the aftermath of the garbage protests, there was a turn towards a pragmatic and technocratic approach to politics within Lebanese civil society. A desire to work towards mass consensus, avoid divisive issues and collaborate with the institutions of the state came to predominate, as activists contending with the routinisation of anti-status quo failure developed a nervous commitment to *acting* - to forms of advocacy and lobbying based on their potential for *getting something done*, however minute or ephemeral that something might be, in order to counteract the hopelessness gripping the country.

It is important to contextualise the development and increased popularity of this form of contentious politics in Lebanon within the increased visibility of politicised, middle class, liberal-left activists in the Middle East more generally who, disenchanted with the organisational frameworks of the *failed* parties of the traditional left and reeling from smothered revolutions, had been joining or founding NGOs or networks rather than political parties, and introducing "new forms of political action and more open, dynamic ideologies, as well as simply preferring

pragmatic action to strict ideology" (Cole 241).

Of course, shifts in the contentious politics of the Middle East since 2011 cannot be de-linked from developments on the international scale, especially given the reverberations of the events in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and other regional locales, which inspired activists around the globe to agitate against their own status quos. In 2011, Dean argues, "Europe and the USA experienced the most significant political movement on the Left since 1968" (261). One important, distinguishing factor of these mobilizations, she writes, is that many of the participants insisted that they were *not* political events.

The participants in these mobilizations, Dean continues, abandoned attempts at forging a *we*, an identity rooted in a specific, coherent political project and worldview, emphasizing, instead, "issue politics, identity politics and their own fragmentation into a multitude of singularities" (264). Within this context, neglectful, broken or corrupt states, rather than capitalism as a high-functioning global system structuring social, economic and political life, were framed as the primary culprits behind local, context-specific problems that remained un-universalized, prevented

from being framed as symptoms of something "beyond themselves" (Dean 267).

Emancipatory discourses and lexicons of resistance travel. They travelled from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Zuccotti Park in New York in 2011. And, the anti- or post-political approach to agitating against the order of things described by Dean above, made its way to the Middle East as well, as activists coping with political failure debated what strategies and tactics were most suitable to the counter-revolutionary conjuncture they found themselves in.

Recently, a growing body of literature in the social sciences has attempted to make sense of "processes of depoliticization" by analysing them through the lens of "the post-political" (Wilson and Swyngedouw 6). While the term has been used in multiple ways and deployed to explain a diversity of situations, it generally refers to an increasingly ubiquitous condition in which:

political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. "The people" - as a potentially disruptive political collective - is

replaced by the population – the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimization (Wilson and Swyngedouw 6).

This has given rise to an approach to political change that seeks to achieve compromises between all *stakeholders* involved in a given issue – what has been called *good governance* and which, rather than aiming to interrupt and fundamentally rework the “existing state of the neoliberal political-economic configuration,” aims merely to adjust it and make it more bearable (Wilson and Swyngedouw 5). Scholars like Wilson and Swyngedouw argue that the post-political conjuncture began with Francis Fukuyama’s infamous assertion of “the end of history”, by which he meant the end of the long battle between incompatible ideologies. “Utopia, in short, was a thing of the past” (7).

Elsewhere, I have applied the lens of post-politics to Lebanon’s post-*Hirak* context, in order to make sense of the turn towards a pragmatic and technocratic approach to politics within the country’s civil society scene (forthcoming). This forms part of an attempt to contribute to a much broader literature on the ways in which neoliberalism has restructured not only “policy arrangements and governing

practices” (Larner 191) since the mid-1980s, but also political projects, resistance practices, and imaginings of the agent of change and the subject of politics.

In delineating what he considers the areas to which the anthropology of resistance should dedicate increased attention, in addition to calling for an embrace of the broader affective turn in anthropology, Kurik adds the need to think through what neoliberalism, not only as a force structuring economic and political life, but as a governing rationality affecting *all* aspects of life, plays in shaping subjectivities in protest. It is important to understand the post-war sectarian-neoliberal order in Lebanon not only as something to which activists were and are opposed, but as a system in which they are also embedded, and which has shaped and constrained their activism.

In this paper, however, I turn to minoritarian practices that actively challenged neoliberal rationality and the vision of reality and political possibility it imposes in the Lebanese context and beyond. I draw on two years of fieldwork with the preparatory Marxist reading group for prospective members of the Lebanon-based revolutionary socialist political organisation *Al-Muntada Al-Ishtiraki* (The Socialist

Forum), to evaluate the reasons behind and the effects of an alienated activist minority’s insistence on engaging in Marxist theoretical practice in a conjuncture widely labelled *post-Marxist*, when leftist thought and critique was widely dismissed by many anti-status quo actors as sterile and idealist.

In so doing, my goal is to argue for an attentiveness to the generative role that ideologies, alter-realities, futurities and the affective infrastructures that prop them up play in the survival, reproduction and growth of social movements, in light of the global popularity over the last few years of post-ideological or anti-ideological approaches to contentious politics. Additionally, I hope to draw analytical attention to the central role that study as a mode of political praxis can play in the nurturing of the radical political imagination, the sense of futurity this imagination can be productive of, and the loyalty this horizon needs in order to survive in the face of innumerable obstacles and delays. This, then, is very much a study of the banality of resistance and of the intimate life of social movements, and the crucial role that this banality and intimacy can play in the fuelling of anti-status quo action even in the face of routine failure.

At the time of writing, Lebanon was in the grips of an unprecedented revolution – one that would surely spur many an analytical response. But there is a dearth of scholarly literature on the processes that precede and follow bold political events in the region – the *in between*, during which the foundations for these pivotal moments, as well as their shortcomings, are cultivated.

There are lessons to be derived, I argue, from an overlooked form of leftist political praxis that unfolded during a counter-revolutionary moment – one dismissed as not worthy of being viewed as praxis at all. These lessons may be useful not only for scholars hoping to make sense of the rise and fall of social movements, but for anyone invested in cultivating such movements within both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary conjunctures.

The Stench of Possibility

The garbage protests of the summer of 2015 constituted the largest cross-sectarian mobilisation around livelihood concerns and demands since the end of Lebanon's 15-year civil war in 1990 (Kerbage 5). The *Hirak*, as it became locally known, was a resounding *enough*. It was a declaration of the intolerability of humiliating, widespread precariousness and

neglect; a refusal to continue to accept a disposability that served to enable the luxurious lifestyles and wealth accumulation of a privileged few, allowing them to profit endlessly at the expense of others (Butler and Athanasiou 147). The *Hirak* was, in short, an *event*, in Alain Badiou's sense of the term, which constituted a “real break” a moment of rupture, destabilising the “pre-existing order,” that framed the status quo as a condition that not only could but *had* to be tolerated, the alternative being descent, yet again, into civil war (Stavrakakis 122). The *Hirak* was, for a diversity of anti-status quo actors, an event charged with potential, with the transformative possibilities that could emerge from a standing together in public – until its momentum fizzled out and it *failed*.

There were two competing anti-status quo discourses vying for hegemony during the *Hirak*. One survived, evolved, and came to dominate the doxa and praxis of Lebanese civil society, while the other retreated to the peripheries of that milieu. Middle-class, youth-led collectives like You Stink, which claimed to have launched the movement through its hashtag, positioned themselves as the organisers of these mobilisations. Theirs was a rights-based approach, underpinned by a vague discourse about an ineffective and corrupt

government, and a generalised opposition to “the rule of ‘Crooks’” (Kerbage 18). Controversial issues that could prove divisive were avoided, and:

specific demands were articulated in a purely scientific and technical language and were confined to providing various environmental solutions to the trash crisis...Knowledge production advocacy was always dominated by a discourse of technicality and scientific expertise, distancing itself from social and economic demands emerging from the protestors (Kerbage 18).

But the pragmatic and technocratic politics of You Stink and similar groupings was not the only discourse being propagated by independent activists during the *Hirak*. *Al-Sha'b Yurid* (The People Want), a gathering of independent activists, collectives and organisations that broadly identified with leftist principles, was formed not only to participate in the protests in an organised manner, but to actively challenge what its members considered the limited and problematic discourses of groups like You Stink. They pushed for an approach that went beyond garbage – that addressed the political system and Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal order in its entirety. *Al-Sha'b Yurid* criticised the

demand for a private sector solution to the garbage crisis. It countered the popular narrative that working class protestors – who challenged middle class organisers' dedication to non-violence and its equation with civilised protest – were infiltrators (*mundasseen*), thugs sent by sectarian bosses to disrupt the protests. To calls for reforming the system, *al-Sha'b Yurid* responded with the need to persist until its dismantlement.

But *al-Sha'b Yurid* was overshadowed by groups like You Stink, which exerted significant control over the narratives and statements presented to the media, speaking on behalf of the many, simplifying and generalising demands and interests in a way that proved incapable of maintaining the momentum of a street that eventually lost sight of what it was mobilising for. As the government debated various solutions to the garbage crisis, it ignored the input of civil society and eventually imposed a solution that a country desperate to be rid of the flood of toxic waste overtaking it was forced to accept.

Unlike the technocratic and pragmatic politics associated with groups like You Stink, the left-wing radicalism of *al-Sha'b Yurid* crumbled after the protests, in a

post-*Hirak* temporal conjuncture that could be characterised, at best, as stagnant and, at worst, as counter-revolutionary. Activists felt paralysed by what many called '*iḥbāt* – frustration and disillusionment. The experience of routine activist failure and the durability of Lebanon's sectarian-neoliberal political system drew many towards an embrace of a pragmatic and technocratic approach to politics.² Within this context, the radical left increasingly come to be seen by independent activists and intellectuals in Lebanon as an out-of-touch and elitist club – a framing that, I argue, has contributed to its marginalisation as an object of study within the academy as well.³

For many of those advocating a pragmatic and technocratic approach to political agitation, the left came to be framed as being mired in something akin to what Berlant calls cruel optimism. Optimism turns cruel, Berlant explains, when one becomes attached to:

compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to either be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic...whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of

what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world (24).

Refusing to acknowledge the *impossibility* of achieving their socialist desires in the Lebanese present, these radicals, it was argued, chose to abandon *realistic* political work for the luxury of ethical paralysis. In the remainder of this article, I will challenge this positing of supposed leftist inertia and negativity as a relation of cruel optimism. In a moment when the need to examine social movements in the Middle East carries a particularly potent sense of urgency, it might seem futile or indulgent to examine a form of activism derided as detached and irrelevant by many on the ground in Lebanon. However, I wish to pushback against this framing.

I draw on participant-observation with Marxist reading groups organised by *al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki* (The Socialist Forum), a key participant within *al-Sha'b Yurid*, to argue for an understanding of collective study as a form of productive political praxis within counter-revolutionary conjunctures such as the one Lebanon and the wider Middle East found themselves in when I carried out fieldwork between the summers of 2016 and 2018.

I argue for an understanding of the reading group as a space where a *politics of queer utopia* could be and was being practiced, amidst stifling socio-economic and political conditions. Following from Munoz, I use the term queerness to designate “a desire for another way of being in the world and time, a desire that resists the mandate to accept that which is not enough” (365).

The reading group, I argue, constituted a space for the routine cultivation of a utopian imaginativeness that allowed participants to see beyond the straitjacket of an insufferable present, and to develop a commitment to reaching past it. Rather than viewing the theoretical labor of the Marxists with whom I worked as something futile, sterile or detached from reality, I approach it as an attempt to puncture a hegemonic conception of reality that limited the scope of political imagination and action.

An Alternative Left

Officially established in 2011 the Socialist Forum, which at its peak played host to between 50 and 60 members, defined itself not as a political party, but as a project for the building of one (*mashrū‘ binā’ hizb*).¹⁴ Its members distinguished themselves politically from other leftist and lib-

eral parties and anti-status quo activist groupings based on their revolutionary theory of change, which necessitated that equal attention be paid to gender and sexual rights, the building of socialism from below, the liberation of workers, the critique of capitalism and the protection of the environment, amongst other core principles, and that saw reformism and electoral politics as inadequate strategies for long-term political change.

Haugbolle situates groups like the Socialist Forum within a history of *rebel intellectuals* in Lebanon who drew inspiration from the British *new left* of the late 1950s, and who were critical of the communist parties of Syria and Lebanon, the Soviet Union and the Arab nationalist brand of socialism adopted by Nasser in Egypt and the Baath parties in Iraq and Syria (“Bassem Chit” 67).⁵ The revolutionary left of contemporary Lebanon, it can be argued, belongs to a tradition of Lebanese leftism that emerged in the 1960s with groups like Socialist Lebanon, who “saw in Marxist theory and practice...the appropriate tool to effect the revolutionary transformation of their society” (Bardawil 319), and whose disillusionment with Arab nationalism led to a return to the textual source in order to argue against “Stalinist interpretations and

undercut the official Soviet doxas of the time” (Bardawil 323).⁶

Although the political organizers associated with Socialist Lebanon had, for the most part, become in the post-civil war period the disenchanting, independent intellectuals about whom Haugbolle and Bardawil have written, many of the core principles that shaped their beliefs and strategies lived on among younger generations of revolutionary leftists like those associated with the Socialist Forum.

A Safe Space for Study

I began attending the Socialist Forum’s reading groups in July 2016. They took place in the organization’s small office, located in Zico House, a heritage building in the Sanayeh neighbourhood of Beirut, a few feet from one of the most iconic outlets of local fast-food chain Barbar, as well as the infamous Ministry of Interior. Sometimes three or five, sometimes twenty of us, would sit in a tight circle of plastic chairs, sweating under the mild breeze of a weak, old air conditioner in the summer, and shivering in our coats by a small portable heater in the winter. Sessions sometimes lasted for an hour and a half, sometimes three hours, punctuated by cigarette breaks marked by extended debates after heated argu-

ments, or the occasional awkward silence following a dull discussion.

Each reading group ran for an eight-week cycle and involved participants reading Marxist texts as well as articles written by members of the Socialist Forum. These were assigned by the organization, made available in both English and Arabic, and read alongside texts participants suggested themselves. The reading groups were mandatory for those interested in joining the Socialist Forum – a means of introducing them to the ideological infrastructure of the organisation and ensuring ideational compatibility. Participants were not compelled to join the organisation, but they could not become members without first engaging in this ritual. Participants were young, for the most part, born in the late 1990s or early 2000s, overwhelmingly university students or recent graduates from Beirut's two American universities, as well as the public Lebanese University. They brought a diversity of interests with them – Trump, university life, feminism, queer theory, BDS. Few would finish all of the assigned readings before a given session, but the discussions were almost always lively regardless – imbibing was not the goal.

What many of the reading group participants I spent time and spoke with seemed to have in common prior to joining the reading group was a desire to make sense of things in their environment that were gnawing at them; to find the words and frameworks to articulate and argue for why certain things made them uncomfortable, angry or depressed, why they felt alienated within so many social milieus; and to be anchored in something that *felt* right and *looked* right, instead of floating solitarily from one inadequate socio-political space to another – to see themselves reflected in a collective.

Elena, for example, grew up in a home and milieu dominated by members of the Lebanese Communist Party.⁷ Her parents, however, refused to introduce her to their ideological and political background, or to share memories of the civil war. Living in the southern city of Saida, she tried to get involved in the protests that erupted in 2011, inspired by the revolutions in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and other neighboring countries, but found those unfolding in her locale dominated by Arab nationalist parties, which did not appeal to her. When her partner joined the Socialist Forum, she followed suit after hearing about the reading groups. Like many of those I interviewed, Elena told me that prior to joining

the reading group, she was secure in her values – she could *feel* them, but she couldn't find a way to articulate or formulate them coherently until she began participating in this process of collective study:

I didn't know how to discuss, build arguments, defend why I see myself as a socialist. This is where I found the *right words*. Left to my own devices, I would have said I didn't have time to read, but once it was structured, things were different. I saw the reading groups as a safe space to say whatever I was thinking.

Elena's experience in the reading group shaped her participation in the garbage protests of 2015. "I always thought of myself as not having enough information. I wanted information," she told me,

2015 happened and I felt, now everything I know I can somewhat apply in these protests. We didn't only go and protest. We would talk to people, plan, write statements. I felt like we could do something. In 2011, I would just go to protests alone then go home. It was important to me, to feel like I was part of something and I was doing something, even if with a small group.

Carrying out such life interviews, it became clear to me that the impetus for joining the Socialist Forum was, for many, as much about the personal as it was about the political; about what these individuals needed to survive in an *existential* sense; what they needed to cope with life in Lebanon and to make something of it more substantial and fulfilling than merely getting by. It was about not feeling abnormal or insane, idealistic or irrational for their views of and visions for the world; and, it was about gaining validation and gratification.

Mounir, a math teacher, attributed the development of his political consciousness to his move to France for university, where he first became acutely aware of his Arabness. He described the reading group as a form of therapy:

I might have lost my mind if I didn't have these reading groups, because I hated my job, my relationship was complicated, I lived in a place I didn't like outside of Beirut. Coming back from France was hard, but the reading groups empowered me - thinking with people who were actually asking questions and looking for answers, and the unwritten rule was solidarity, listening for alternatives, being able to

change your mind in response to other people's experiences, and also taking into account privileges.

Only in his late 20s when we met, Nasser, a teacher and graduate student in Middle East Studies at the American University of Beirut, already boasted a life peppered with activist experiences. He attended the climate talks in Copenhagen in 2009, worked with the anti-racism movement in Lebanon, received training in non-violent direct action from IndyACT and Green Peace, and even spent around four months camping with Occupy activists in Colorado, Nevada, Arizona and Oakland. Everything he participated in, however, eventually failed, faltered or petered out. In the reading group, Nasser was able to come to terms with his political desires as legitimate, necessary but also fantastical - as goals that must be worked towards even if he were never to see them manifest. The reading group emerged as a safe, nurturing space for cultivating a commitment to a perhaps impossible, but nevertheless crucial, grander vision - one to which there existed no alternative that carried a comparable promise of universal egalitarianism:

It's a fantasy, but a *necessary* one. It's an ideal, we accept that, but at least

we can attempt to keep getting closer forever, and it becomes a continual dialectical process of becoming. That's both historical and idealist - it's not one or the other.

Nasser insists that one of neoliberal ideology's primary goals is to set the parameters of what is and what is not realistic. Part of the impetus for being engaged in the theoretical exercises of the reading group was to create a space for constantly challenging and fighting against this vision of reality.

In the space of the reading group, study emerged as a mode of preparing for revolution distinct from knowledge production for the sake of reform as could be seen amongst the expert-activists dominating Lebanese civil society at the time of my research. The study mode is "dissonant" (9), as Halberstam writes in his introduction to Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons*. It is "disorganized study" (9), which refuses order and expertise; "a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you" (11); a way of "being together in brokenness" (12). This study mode is meant to transform the subject and teach them the conditions and techniques necessary for transforming others.

The contrasting mode of activism is characterized by expertise-driven knowledge production: a being together in enlightenment – sharing ideas deemed neutral and scientific and only in need of being heard, already designed and ready for assembly. Reform the system and the subject will transform or, alternatively, transform the subject and they will dismantle the system.

Before being able to collapse sectarian-neoliberalism, the Socialist Forum recognized the need to end the standpoint from which this system of governance *made sense*, from which it read as a reality that was always already inevitable.¹⁵ Lebanon's population, like that of much of the world, had been made accustomed to precarity (Butler and Athanasiou 43). The normalization of precarity as the way things simply are had made it difficult to mobilize people in the service of change that, as a result of this normalization, *felt* impossible. Many had developed coping mechanisms to survive and navigate the everyday precariousness that characterized their lives. To abandon these coping mechanisms in the name of rebellion or revolution was seen as too big a risk to take for an alternative future that had been made to feel unachievable.

Neoliberal rationality, Wendy Brown argues, incapacitates the imagination, rendering it incapable of designing visions of the good life, limiting its focus to survival and the acquisition of wealth (“Undoing the Demos” 43).⁹ Comaroff and Comaroff write that it could be convincingly argued that neoliberal capitalism “in its millennial moment, portends the death of politics” (322), or at least its dilution to the “pursuit of pure interest, individual or collective – or to struggles over issues (the environment, abortion, health care, child welfare, human rights), that important though they may be, are often, pace Jameson (47), dissociated from anything beyond themselves” (322). In the Lebanese case, both mainstream political parties and many of civil society's anti-status quo movements insisted that mismanagement was Lebanon's key problem, an understanding which authorized managerialism as a solution to neoliberal development that was not so much considered a fundamental problem in and of itself, shifting the focus to what was said to be its flawed or corrupt implementation.

Through its reading groups, the Socialist Forum not only brainstormed how best to engage in “a struggle within a reality,” but also how to approach “the struggle *between* realities” (Hage, “Dwelling” 11).

The reading group was a space for contending not only with a material, but also an ontological violence, that had imposed a particular understanding and experience of reality and, with it, what constituted realistic or worthwhile political struggle, foreclosing more radical possibilities. The refusal of what many other activists accept as a reality – sectarianism, neoliberalism, the failed state – that could only ever be adjusted, reformed or improved upon made, to borrow from Moten and Harney, *fugitives* of these radical leftists, fugitivity here being a product of a refusal to settle, a “being together in homelessness,” and an embrace of “dispossession” (96) not only from mainstream society, but from the already peripheral community of anti-status quo activists as well.

Nomads wandering between socio-political milieus until they were drowning in disappointment and boredom, sought solace in the reading group as study mode, where they could remind themselves and one another routinely that they “cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgment generated by the very system that denies that anything was ever broken”, that they must refuse “the choices as offered” in order to create a productive dissonance; that they must

strive to “access the places that we know lie outside” the walls of the present (Halberstam 6). Marxism, for the reading group participants, functioned much like queerness as described by Munoz – as a “structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1).

Before joining the reading group, many had a sense that something was off, a cauldron of feelings bubbling inside them – anger, discomfort, anxiety, disgust. In the space of the reading group, these feelings were validated, given material roots, their sources explained. This process of emotional excavation, of making analytical sense of the visceral, was therapeutic and enlivening. Even those who had discovered on their own in Marx and others a convincing explanation for their alienation and rage, needed this process of *collective* analysis and acknowledgement to feel ready and willing to struggle for the world they wanted. The camaraderie generated by this space and process of collective study was key to the reproduction of the utopian imaginativeness these leftists were committed to maintaining a commitment to.

“Leftism gives me a sense of solidarity,” Tina told me, who when we spoke was

studying for an undergraduate degree in philosophy at the American University of Beirut:

Solidarity in the sense that a lot of people felt just as hopeless and mistreated as me, and misery really loves company. It also gave me a sense of agency because it provided me with tools to understand oppression, rather than just accept it as a static fact. But most importantly, it gave me an alternative, and hope that our political situation is not, by essence, *unchangeable*.¹⁶

When the present constitutes a drawn out impasse, “preaching to the choir” can emerge as a valuable and political act, as a “world-confirming strategy of address that performs solidarity and asserts righteousness” (Berlant 238). This ritual can serve as a means of performing a future utopia – what it might be like when or if a particular worldview becomes hegemonic. It is in this sense that, Berlant argues, optimism that manifests as “a stubborn collective refusal to give out, wear out, or admit defeat,” might not actually be cruel, “but the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change as such” (259).

In the space of the reading group, the present was confronted, analysed, taken seriously but also transcended, left behind, with the collective gaze of the participants working together to unblur a vision of what could be. It wasn’t a space for pragmatic solutions, but for rethinking and reformulating questions and problems. Sessions were, to build on Munoz, moments of *temporal disorganization*, “where the here and now is transcended by a then and there that could be and indeed should be” (9); a challenge to the limits that neoliberal rationality had imposed on the radical political imagination.

The Affective Output of Marxist Theoretical Labor

Feeling convinced by the ideas and the logic being articulated in the space of the reading group was important to Mounir, but equally essential was what he called the emotional factor – the therapeutic component:

You *feel* oppression, you don’t need to think about it to feel it, but *when you put words to it*, you become *empowered*. That’s not because ideas empower you, but because you have a group of people with these ideas empowering you. They probably won’t

have readymade solutions, but this solidarity, I felt it, and it did help me in my life, to move away from the job I didn't like, the people who were draining me, everything and everyone I thought I owed anything to, and practicing this idea that I am legitimate, my ideas are legitimate, and other people share these ideas.

One of the most memorable reading group sessions I attended was one where Jean, a graduate student in journalism at the Lebanese University who was also balancing a full-time job at a local humanitarian NGO working with Syrian refugees, opened up about the abuse he had experienced from his family because of his sexuality. He described, to a room full of recent acquaintances, the experience of having been beaten by male relatives in front of his parents. What made him feel comfortable enough to share such a harrowing and personal story? "I hesitated before I talked about personal stuff," he told me,

but I felt that the people in the reading group, because they understood from a *structural* perspective the thing I went through, wouldn't judge me. They understood. Before, I didn't understand things as - I'm oppressed. I used to

think, *that's it*. My parents didn't accept that I'm gay, and that's it. They kicked me out, and it ends here. I didn't think that this was part of something bigger, part of misogyny and patriarchy and a number of other things.

It didn't matter to Jean whether the other participants shared his particular experience. It didn't matter to him what anybody else's sexual orientation or gender identity was, or if they shared his working class background. What mattered was that the people around him *understood*, rather than shared, his particular struggle - that they understood it as not particular at all. "The people in the Socialist Forum, they have a different story and experience. I don't need to know it, but these people share the ideas that explain or make sense of the thing I went through."

The Socialist Forum's reading groups were not strategy sessions - teleological exercises meant to result in a step-by-step manifesto to guide revolutionary change. They were spaces for discussing readings but also for telling stories through which to cultivate what Hage, following from Bourdieu, calls a "specific radical *illu*o: not just a conception of the world but an investment in it." Bourdieu, Hage tells us, "links *illu*o with a social libido because

the way we invest ourselves in the social world is not only intellectual but also libidinal" ("Critical Anthropological Thought" 291).

In the Socialist Forum's case, study, to borrow from Agamben, was a means without an *immediate* end - a being with others who refused the present and the limited choices for increased inclusion it offered, developing alongside them a fidelity to this refusal bolstered by an understanding of various forms of oppression as structurally interlinked, and of democracy and politics as something akin to what Butler and Athanasiou call a collective "commitment to incessant contestation" (156). The reading group was a space for routinely performing one's (un)belonging (Butler and Athanasiou 159) to the lifeworlds enveloping and suffocating those who felt alienated by them; from ways of being, thinking and acting grounded in nation or sect, ethnicity and class, or even enlightened secular elitism. Refusal and negation were not necessarily mere forms of escape or distraction in this case, but technologies of self and collective.

"I can't talk about a utopian society or communism in a hundred years," Mounir told me,

but I can talk about solidarity and communism as it's practiced every day. Obviously, it's not the dominant structure, *but just because it's not winning doesn't mean it's not there*. It's there every time someone cooperates with someone else, every time someone resists oppression, this is how I see it. I don't believe something is coming *that is going to sweep us all away - it's already here*, we just need to go down to its scale and work with what we have.

Borrowing theoretically from Berlant, I see the Socialist Forum's reading group as a space defined by "an attachment to the process of maintaining attachment" to the political (260); a space where, building on Munoz, a form of "affective reanimation" was routinely provoked as a means of displacing "disabling political pessimism" (9). In the space of the reading group, utopia was cultivated as a structure of feeling.

Devotees of Trotsky's notion of permanent revolution, it makes sense that the members of the Socialist Forum who designed and convened the reading groups attempted to cultivate within this space something akin to what Alain Badiou calls fidelity to *event-ness*. For Badiou, an event "refers to a real break, which destabilizes a given discursive articulation, pre-existing

order" (Stavrakakis 152). Lebanon's garbage protests of 2015 could be classified as an event. Every event, however, is accompanied by the "ever-present risk of terror and absolutisation" (155). In order to avoid this, Badiou argues that political actors must cultivate what he calls fidelity to *event-ness*, rather than to a one-off event, a dedication to "a permanent democratic revolution in our political ethos, a sceptical passing that will have to be re-inscribed in every political act" (157).

This is what Badiou calls ethics, and it is in this sense that I agree with critics of the revolutionary left who claim its adherents subscribe to a primarily ethical positionality, but I disagree that it is necessarily an inert positionality, or a safe and comfortable one. On the contrary, it can be a means of routinely reaching beyond the quagmire of the present towards a "horizon imbued with potentiality" (Munoz 1). In the case of the Socialist Forum, critique was not a means of dismissing *everything*, as one of my sceptical interviewees put it, but dismissing a present that was not enough and would never be enough for these leftists, who chose to approach politics as a "critical mode of hope" (4); a striving against what Munoz calls "straight time" (17), which "tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our every-

day life" (22). It was a mode of abandoning "prescriptive ends" in favour of "an opening or horizon" (Munoz 22).

It is in this sense that I argue the politics of the Socialist Forum's reading groups as utopian and queer in Munoz's sense of the term, driven constantly forward by a socialism their participants knew they would likely never touch, but whose potentiality continuously mobilized them. "Utopia is an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence is not enough," writes Munoz (100). In the negative work of critique is a positive projection forward, away from a pragmatism that imprisons one in an insufficient present.

In her work on American satire, Haugerud argues that humor's gift "is to show us that today's world can be made differently" (203). In this article, I have argued that, for participants in the Marxist reading groups I attended over the course of two years in a Beirut reeling from the supposed failure of yet another anti-status quo mobilization, this was Marxism's gift, to show that "alternatives, as unreal and absurd as they may seem to be, are not unthinkable" (Haugerud 203).

Conclusion: On Utopia and Revolution

In October of 2019, Lebanon witnessed the outbreak of revolution – a revolution demanding social and economic justice and the fall of the ruling class in its multi-confessional entirety that was, importantly, *unanticipated* by the country's well-established civil society scene.

It is, perhaps, too soon to begin analysing this revolution, which at the time of writing was still ongoing. But, I think what Lebanon has been witnessing since the outbreak of this momentous event – which at its height brought an estimated 2.8 million people into the streets of the country – is the breakdown of this opposition that had become all too common when thinking about political activism in the country: the opposition between, on the one hand, the pragmatic and technocratic, what was considered *realistic* and achievable and, on the other, what was considered heterotopic and idealistic – a mere retreat into a liminal space of pure politics with no impact on the world. The October Revolution, marked by a mass politics of refusal, by the population's overwhelming rejection of the ameliorative gestures of the state, hints at the possibility of the emergence of an approach to counter-politics from below that transcends this limiting binary.

A central question moving forward, is whether the mass politics of refusal and civil disobedience unfolding across Lebanon can be harnessed; whether non-compliance can be organised; and whether disparate *no's* can be directed towards a practice and ethos of collective, *strategic* refusal aimed not only at collapsing an unjust system but imagining and inching towards an alternative.

In discussing the affective impact of collective study, I have tried to make the case for the centrality of the radical political imagination to the sustainability of social movements – to their ability to reproduce themselves. To be clear, I have not attempted to argue that, utopian telos in hand, activists will be assured a victory, but rather, that such a victory, while not guaranteed, without a utopian imaginativeness appears impossible (Jameson 38). What the *utopian leap* allows us to do, as Jameson argues, is to better diagnose and critique the conditions oppressing us in the present. Utopia is not just a “political vision and program,” but also a “critical and diagnostic instrument” (Jameson 38).

The Lebanese ruling class has long trafficked in *political disorientation* and *fragmentation*. Perhaps what is needed, then, is “the creation of spaces where political

analyses and norms can be proffered and contested” (Brown “States of Injury” 49-50), and through which a radical political imaginativeness can be cultivated, a commitment to which can be productive of the comradeship and solidarity necessary for a social movement to persevere and grow.

As Hermez wrote when reflecting on Lebanon's anti-sectarian movement of 2011, “what was pervasive in Lebanon was a unique situation in which we did action alone and reflection alone, but the two were often not done together, in tandem, as part of the same master project” (“Activism as ‘Part-Time’ Activity” 47). What was needed, he continued, was not so much “to live or die for a cause,” but rather, “to create a movement that could be sustained full-time” (Hermez 49).

Noteworthy about what was, at the time of writing, unfolding on the ground in Lebanon, was that many of the revolutionaries who previously played active roles within the country's civil society scene appeared conscious of the fact that these conversations were neglected in previous movements and moments – that such stillnesses for much needed reflection, were routinely abandoned in favour of *acting*. They have responded to this gap with con-

Sophie Chamas

is a Senior Teaching Fellow at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS, University of London. As an anthropologist of social movements, she is interested in thinking through the life, death and afterlife of the radical political imaginary in the Middle East and beyond.

email: sophiechamas@gmail.com

certed efforts to create spaces where these conversations could unfold – where world-making could unfold in the midst of a protest or sit-in; in the midst of the revolutionary event.

It remains to be seen what will come of Lebanon's October Revolution, but it is important to point out, at this early stage, the possibilities contained in the politics of refusal that have characterised and sustained it, and the ways in which this unprecedented and unanticipated political event has demonstrated the potentiality and productivity of a negative dialectics that, in other conjunctures, might have been dismissed as counter-productive (Povinelli 190) – in short, the world-making potentiality of refusing the present and slouching towards utopia.

Notes

¹ Lebanon's garbage crisis was sparked by the closure of the Naameh garbage landfill in southeast Beirut, to which the waste of Beirut and Mount Lebanon had been sent since 1998. The landfill was forcefully closed by protestors who lived in the village, and who had become fed up with the existence of the toxic dumpsite, which was originally meant to be a temporary solution to the management of the capital's waste. The closure of the landfill coincided with the expiration of the contract between the state and Sukleen, the private waste-management company tasked with trash collection in Beirut and Mount Lebanon since 1996. In July 2015, the government decided not to renew Sukleen's contract as usual, choosing instead to invite bids from alternative waste management companies, causing garbage to pile up in the streets, pour out of bins, and fester in the summer heat (Kerbage 5).

² This trend towards the pragmatic and technocratic crystallized into a more cohesive political movement with the emergence of Beirut Madinati, an independent campaign of Lebanese professionals who contested Beirut's municipal elections in 2016.

³ There is a growing body of historiographically-oriented scholarly literature that argues the need to take seriously the twentieth century Arab left by examining the problem spaces or critical political conjunctures its adherents inhabited. But the leftists who occupy what Fadi Bardawil calls our *post-Marxist conjuncture* have not been offered the same degree of scholarly attention.

⁴ The Trotskyist organization was the product of the coming together of two groups - The Revolutionary Communist League, associated with the Fourth International, and the Leftist Assembly for Change, which had informal links with the International Socialist Tendency. Despite differences, most markedly a generational one between the Revolutionary Communist League, established in the 1970s and made up of leftists active during the civil war period, and the Leftist Assembly for Change (established in 2005), which was more youth-led, the groups found common ground based on their desire to build an alternative to the Stalinist rhetoric and *stage-ism* of the Lebanese Communist Party.

⁵ This group included people who were influenced by Trotsky and the so-called Fourth International. Traces of Trotskyism can be found in the work of Yassin Hafez, George Tarabishi and others who clustered around the group Arab Socialism in the early 1960s, which later developed into what Tareq Ismael, writing in 1976, called a "New Arab Left" (Haugbolle, "Bassem Chit" 67).

⁶ As Fadi Bardawil explains "at the heart of Socialist Lebanon's interpretation of the [Communist] Manifesto is an argument against the historicist 'not yet' that relegates the working class and the revolutionary act to the 'waiting room' of history, to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty, since the objective conditions of the moment are not ripe for its autonomous action" (323).

⁷ When referring to members of the Socialist Forum or participants in its reading groups, I use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

⁸ As Wendy Brown notes, it is important to understand neoliberalism and its myriad instantiations as "a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality" ("Undoing the Demos" 10).

⁹ By the good life, Brown explains, thinkers like Aristotle and Marx "did not mean luxury, leisure, or indulgence, but rather the cultivation and expression of distinctly human capacities for ethical and political freedom, creativity, unbounded reflection, or invention" ("Undoing the Demos" 43).

¹⁰ As Lauren Berlant writes, "discussions about the contours and contents of the shared historical present are therefore always profoundly political ones, insofar as they are about what forces should be considered responsible and what crises urgent in our adjudication of survival strategies and conceptions of a better life than what the metric of survival can supply" (4).

→

→ Works Cited

AbiYaghi, Marie-Noelle, Catusse, Myriam, and Miriam Younes. "From isqat an-nizam at-ta'ifi to the Garbage

Crisis Movement: Political Identities and Antisectarian Movements." *Lebanon Facing the Arab Uprisings: Constraints and Adaptation*, edited by Rosita Di Peri and Daniel Meier. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 73-91.

Bardawil, Fadi. "Dreams of a Dual Birth: Socialist Lebanon's World and Ours." *Boundary 2*, vol. 43, no.3, 2016, pp. 313-335.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton University Press, 1995.

Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. MIT Press, 2015.

Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Polity Press, 2013.

Cole, Juan. *The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Comaroff, John, and Jean Comaroff. "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming." *Public Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2000, pp. 291-343.

Dean, Jodie. "After Post-Politics: Occupation and the Return of Communism." *The Post-Political and its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*, edited by Japhy Wilson and Eric Swyngedouw. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp. 261-278.

Hage, Ghassan. "Dwelling in the Reality of Utopian Thought." *TDSR*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 7-13.

---. "Critical Anthropological Thought and the Radical Political Imaginary." *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2012, pp. 285-308.

---. *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination*. Melbourne University Press, 2015.

Halberstam, Jack. "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons." *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, edited by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Aotonomedia, 2013, pp. 2-14.

Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Aotonomedia, 2013.

Haugbolle, Sune. "Bassem Chit and Revolutionary Socialism in Lebanon." *Middle East - Topics & Arguments* no. 6, 2016, pp. 65-74.

---. "Social Boundaries and Secularism in the Lebanese Left." *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2013, pp. 427-443.

Haugerud, Angelique. *No Billionaire Left Behind: Satirical Activism in America*. Stanford University Press, 2013.

Hermez, Sami. "On Dignity and Clientelism: Lebanon in the Context of the 2011 Arab Revolutions." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2011, pp. 527-537.

---. "Activism as 'Part-Time' Activity: Searching for Commitment and Solidarity in Lebanon." *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 41-55.

Jeffrey, Craig. "Foreword." *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, edited by Manpreet Kuar Janeja and Andreas Bandak. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. xiii-xv.

Kerbage, Carole. *Politics of Coincidence: The Harak Confronts its "Peoples"* (working paper). Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy, 2017.

Kurik, Bob. "Emerging Subjectivity in Protest." *The SAGE Handbook of Resistance*, edited by David Courpasson and Steven Vallas. Sage Publications Ltd, 2016, pp. 51-77.

Larner, Wendy. "The Limits of Post-Politics: Rethinking Radical Social Enterprise." *The Post-Political and its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*, edited by Japhy Wilson and Eric Swyngedouw. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp.189-207.

Munoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Stavrakakis, Yannis. *The Lacanian Left: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Politics*. Suny Press, 2007.

→

- Wilson, Japhy, and Eric Swyngedouw. "Seeds of Dystopia: Post-Politics and the Return of the Political." *The Post-Political and its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*, edited by Japhy Wilson and Eric Swyngedouw. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp.1-24.



 creative commons
(CC BY 4.0)

ISSN: 2196-629X
[https://doi.org/10.17192/
meta.2020.14.8021](https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2020.14.8021)