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Field Notes

Living Revolution, Financial Collapse and Pandemic in Beirut: Notes on Temporality, Spatiality, and "Double Liminality"

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Abstract

This article reflects on the experience of living an exceptional year of revolution, financial collapse, pandemic (and later, explosion) in Lebanon since October 2019. Based on auto-ethnography, the article grapples with the experience of "double liminality" by juxtaposing the revolutionary moment of publicness, enthusiasm and clarity; to the pandemic moment of isolation, rumination and anxiety.

Keywords

liminality – communitas – Lebanon – thawra/revolution – temporality

From "Join the Streets" to "Stay at Home": The Experience of "Double Liminality"

October 26, 2019: A week into the *thawra* (or "revolution") in Lebanon, several protests concurrently marched the streets of Beirut heading toward the

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famous Ring bridge where they all merged together and marched to the nearby Martyrs' Square. Organized by university students and professors, the meeting points were the main gates of some universities in town. I was part of a new group of professors – The Association of Independent Professors – that was born on the first week of the thawra, and that aimed at reviving the labor and student movement in the country. In our thousands, we marched the streets of the city, raising our voices against the oligarchs and politicians, the banking system, and the religious/sectarian leaders ruling over our lives in this country. I was at the protest that marched from the gate of the American University of Beirut in the Hamra district. While roaming the streets of different neighborhoods, people on their balconies greeted us with cheering and clapping. The crowds in the streets replied with the famous chant:

> *yalli wa'if 'al balcon, nzal nahna sha'bak hon*
> (To those standing on the balcony, come down and join your people here!)

As we reached Clemenceau, a student with a megaphone was leading the chants with hundreds repeating after her:

> *ya muwaten, ya maskeen, dehko 'alayk b esm el deen... yalla enzel 'al share'*
> [Oh citizen! Oh poor one! They fooled you in the name of religion ... come on take to the street!]

The "street" had become the normal place to be. The calls to leave our houses and join the streets, to be in the squares with others, and to reclaim the public spaces of the city had become commonplace. That day, we reached Martyrs' Square in the late afternoon, after hours of marching, and gathered around our tents in the Azarieh parking lot with friends, colleagues, students, family members, and people we had never met before. As the sun started to set, public discussions started in the square with heated debates about the revolution, the financial collapse, and the possible ways forward. This was then followed by late night singing and hanging out in the tents where some were spending the night, while others were already sleeping.

The public squares were ours. Never before had I spent so much time "outside." I remember going back home some days at the end of the night to quickly shower and sleep for a few hours in my bed before waking up all energetic and ready to go back to the square. In our tents, we had worked out a whole communal system whereby tasks were divided, costs were shared, electricity was distributed, and the space was collectively used for kids' activities in the morning and adults' discussion groups and hanging out in the afternoon and evening. The

newly born Association of Independent University Professors, which I helped found and organize, was located in the Azarieh lot, right next to some student tents and close to the feminist and queer spaces. Every morning, a group of parents with their children would clean up the squares and pick up the garbage from the night before. Some would come with *mana'ish* and sandwiches to distribute to people in the tents for breakfast. A communal kitchen, *Matbakh El Balad,* was set up by volunteers who provided free meals for everyone on a daily basis. Some days, birthdays were celebrated in the tents with cake and cookies distributed to everyone around. It was like a dream. The spontaneous coming together of a "communitas," where an experience of togetherness and comradeship reigned in this liminal moment of the *thawra*, was hard to miss.[1] The everyday experience of being in the square during that time was close to what sociologist Eric Olin Wright called "real utopias."[2] The alternatives were somehow created and lived in our everyday, without being directly reflected in the political structures or necessarily translated into a political process of radical structural change. However, our communal presence and way of being in those squares made us feel that the dream of a revolution can be real as we experienced it and felt it could be. This does not mean that everything was ideal or that social stratifications had disappeared or that social justice was achieved. But it simply means that in this liminal moment, which had created a rupture in the status quo and destabilized our ways of being, a multitude of possibilities and imaginaries took shape and formed in various –though ephemeral – ways. Rather than over-romanticizing the revolutionary moment of the beginning, one can say that the initial stages of the uprising opened room for us to connect with each other in new ways, to share our dreams (and, maybe more importantly, our enemies), and to be able to re-imagine our communities and our collective alternatives.

Fast forward to March 15, 2020: The COVID-19 plague had already reached Lebanon, and a lockdown was imposed by the newly-formed government. I was laying down lazily on my couch watching TV at home listening to the refrain of a song by the famous Lebanese singer Fairouz, which was playing before every advertising break:

> *khaleek bel bayt, Allah ykhaleek*
> (Stay at home, may God protect you)

For weeks, all we were told was "stay at home." A pandemic was upon us. Lebanon's deteriorating financial situation meant that the fear of the virus was

1 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 360.

2 Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010).

compounded with a fear of our financial inability to afford basic healthcare for those who would get affected. Like elsewhere, staying at home became a matter of not just protecting oneself but also protecting others in our communities. Thinking about this moment as juxtaposed to the previous months of the revolution, it seemed absurd and counterintuitive that the best thing we could do to protect each other was to stay at home, isolate, and maintain a "social" – more accurately, "physical" – distance.

The absurdity of the condensed experience of opposite extremes – from calling on people to leave their homes and join the streets to asking them to stay at home and isolate – was unbearable. After almost four months since the start of the October revolution in Lebanon, we found ourselves collectively confined to our homes (when possible). The contrast between these two opposite states of being was mindboggling. How did we move from being in the "public" most of the time, to being restrained to our "private" spaces so suddenly? How did we shift from being part of a collective, a "communitas," to being in isolation and abiding by what was wrongly called "social distancing"? More importantly, how did we move from a focus on the financial and political crisis to a focus on epidemiology and public health as technical concerns detached from politics?

The newly-appointed government did not wait too long before using the excuse of the pandemic to remove all the tents from the protest squares, putting an end to our physical takeover of the "public." The last couple of months before the pandemic were already difficult. The weight of the financial crisis, in addition to the political deadlock and general fatigue, made it difficult for people to maintain their engagement in the movements. The squares started to become less crowded, and the capacity of the revolution to disrupt the "return to normal" became less effective. However, despite the slowing down of the uprising in the streets, the abrupt shift to home confinement and isolation created a liminal experience, or a limbo, of a more anxious nature. It was as if we moved from the "dream" of the revolution to the "nightmare" of the pandemic, and then to finally waking up, sweating, exhausted, and unable to make sense of the intensity of the past months of our lives. In that sense, the few months between October 2019 and March 2020 in Lebanon witnessed an experience of "double liminality" through two extraordinary moments: a revolution and a plague, both within the context of acute financial collapse.

Clarity Within Liminality: The "Here and Now" of the Revolutionary Moment

The literature dealing with the concept of liminality comes mainly from the field of anthropology where rites of passage – such as childbirth, marriage, puberty,

initiation, or funerals – are usually described as a liminal experience of "in-betweenness," marked by ambiguity and danger in this period of moving from one state (or stage in life) to another.[3] This concept of liminality has more recently started to be used in the literature on revolution as an experience of "transition," a "temporal limbo," or a "time out of time."[4] In his work on the Egyptian revolution, Armburst describes how "we depart from 'normality'; enter a liminal state in which different possibilities can be entertained, a kind of subjunctive state; and then reenter a new normality."[5] Sabae similarly talks about the extraordinary experience of the Egyptian revolution in forming "a slice of time" whereby a rupture with the "familiar" unfolds through the ordinariness of the everyday in Tahrir Square.[6] This liminal state between old and new normality/familiarity, this state of anticipation, utopia and dream, is described as being characteristic of the experiences of revolution more generally. Similarly, like in other revolutions, the intensity of the experience in the squares, the collective mode of being and coalescing in the crowds during protests, and the "collective effervescence" that usually emerges out of an auditory experience of chanting or clapping forms the *extra*-ordinariness of the revolutionary experience.[7] However, unlike the literature on rites of passage, the experience of liminality in revolutions is not necessarily ambiguous despite the uncertainty.

In my personal experience during the Lebanese October uprising, the initial stages were marked by hopefulness and a sense of clarity rooted in the "here and now." Although liminality is usually approached as a state of limbo and flux, it is also important to note that liminal experiences are lived as present moments detached from the previous or subsequent state of "normality" to

3 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the in-Between* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969); and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966.

4 Walter Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*. Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 4; Lucie Ryzova, "The Battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in Cairo: The Politics and Poetics of Urban Violence in Revolutionary Time," *Past & Present* 247, no. 1 (2020): 273–317; and Hanan Sabea, "A 'Time out of Time': Tahrir, the Political and the Imaginary in the Context of the January 25th Revolution in Egypt," *Hotspots, Fieldsight,* May 9, 2013, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-time-out-of-time-tahrir-the-political-and-the-imaginary-in-the-context-of-the-january-25th-revolution-in-egypt.

5 Armburst, "Martyrs and Tricksters," 4.

6 Ibid.

7 See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912; and Nisrine Chaer, "Sensing Queer Activism in Beirut: Protest Soundscapes as Political Dissent." in *Women Rising: In the Arab Spring and Beyond*, eds. Rita Stephan and M. Charrad (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020).

which they are linked. Read retrospectively or in a longue durée perspective, revolutions might seem ambiguous, messy, or even dark and dangerous. It is in such a context that a literature on counter-revolutions in the Arab uprisings has emerged, borrowing Gramsci's famous quote about the appearance of "morbid symptoms" in those liminal phases where "the old is dying and the new cannot be born."[8] However, at the risk of sounding like the naïve optimists whom Gramsci was criticizing when he wrote this famous quote, I argue that the initial experience in the liminal phase of the start of a revolution is not only one of optimism, but also one of clarity.[9] While we were unsure of how things would unfold or what might happen next during the first weeks of the uprising in Lebanon, the uncertainty of the moment did not translate into ambiguity necessarily. In fact, in this initial moment of the uprising, both the past and the future became less present or relevant in our everyday experience in the squares. The question was about the "now" and the "here." What is to be done, now? What is happening, here? Where do we mobilize, now? How do we proceed, here? The present moment, the 'now', was therefore lived in a "lighter" way, without the heavy weight of the past and the hefty considerations for the future which can blur and blind. This gave room to break with norms, to curse heavily and repeatedly, to name and shame politicians, bankers and religious leaders, and to envision creative alternatives without holding on to past red lines or fearing future consequences. At that moment everything seemed possible. Even the spatiality of the squares at this liminal moment opened up possibilities for multiplicity and oneness simultaneously.[10] As with Sabea's description of Tahrir Square, Martyrs' Square or Riad El Solh Square in downtown Beirut could also "be captured in the oscillation between its appearance as a space of revolution and a space of carnival, which attracted many 'to come and see,' to consume and be consumed by the moment and the place."[11] Despite knowing the structural constraints and limited political opportunities – and thus not being completely oblivious to the "pessimism of the intellect" – a real moment of possibility emerged, and the jargon of realpolitik and pragmatism

8 See Gilbert Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

9 Gilbert Achcar, "Morbid Symptoms: What Did Gramsci Mean and How Does It Apply to Our Time?" *International Socialist Review*, no. 108 (2018), https://isreview.org/issue/108/morbid-symptoms.

10 See Dara Downey, Ian Kinane Ian, and Elizabeth Parker, *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

11 Hanan Sabea, "A 'Time out of Time'.

was not only rejected but also mocked by a large section of the people in the squares.[12] At that point, a famous slogan emerged and spread quickly:

> *Al-sha'eb yutaleb wa la yufawed*
> (The people demand, and do not negotiate)

The euphoria of collective power took over and shaped the experience of the beginning. In those initial weeks of the uprising, the clarity of the potentiality of the present moment in overturning the balance of power was the main drive of people in the squares. In that sense, despite the multitude and fluidity, the limbo and uncertainty, a certain clarity – rooted in the "here and now" of the revolutionary experience – emerged.

The Pandemic and Financial Collapse's Anxious Liminality: Rumination, Isolation, and Exhaustion

The creativity, energy, and intellectual stimulation of the early days of the revolution were quickly replaced by the ambiguity, blankness and anxiety of the pandemic. I remember being restless to the point of exhaustion during the first few days of the lockdown. Although I was confined at home and was barely moving from my bedroom to my living room, a sense of exhaustion took over. Oversleeping, lack of concentration, and rumination marked those early days. The initial shock of the confinement – and of the sudden jump to online teaching – was followed by much anger at the broader context we were living in: a quickly deepening financial crisis and a complete lack of social protection in such dire times. What was even more enraging was that the pandemic created the perfect context for the Lebanese ruling elites to further strengthen their power after the hit they received during the October uprising, and to reposition themselves through their clientelist networks. The ruling elites had already started to consolidate their ranks through their counter-revolutionary tactics of repression, co-optation, and intimidation. They also used their well-established clientelistic networks to pressure their constituencies and weaken the uprising. The balance had tilted to their favor more clearly after the formation of a new "technocratic" government in early 2020. While the Lebanese state is often characterized as being "weak," recent research has shown how

12 See Francesca Antonini, "Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: Gramsci's Political Thought in the Last Miscellaneous Notebooks," *Rethinking Marxism* 31, no.1 (2019): 42–57.

the strength of the Lebanese regime comes from its ability to reproduce itself through the socio-political and economic grip the ruling elites have on large sections of society through their networks of clientelism, their tight relations with the banking system, and their ability to repress and coopt opposition.[13] How did we let this happen? Could we have done anything differently? What will happen to the revolution after the confinement? What will happen to us when the financial crisis hits even harder? Will there be a war? Will we be able to stay in Lebanon? Will we be able to leave the country? Will there be options elsewhere? Will the whole world just collapse? Questions and worries about the future, and ruminations about the past were characteristic of the liminal experience of home confinement during the initial stages of the lockdown. Contrary to the energy and clarity of the start of the revolution, the pandemic was lived with anxiety, ambiguity, and an exhaustion that had been piling up for months.

The plague was repeatedly referred to and framed using the "war" lexicon,[14] an analogy that created much blunder in the context of Lebanon, where reference to war is not simply a metaphor but a triggering memory for many. As described by anthropologist Sami Hermez, the constant anticipation of war in Lebanon had created an "in the meantime" temporality in everyday life.[15] While people are used to living in the expectation of war, the spring of 2020 brought with it a new type of "war" and anxious anticipation: a free-fall of the financial situation combined with an unanticipated plague. The speed at which things were happening gave a general feeling of living a condensed and precipitated downfall that no one could possibly have been ready for.

While a literature on liminality of revolution and of war (or anticipation of war) as experiences of limbo and in-betweenness has already emerged and started to flourish, expressions of such liminality when it comes to the plague was most beautifully expressed by Arundhati Roy who described the pandemic

13 See Hanness Baumann, "Social Protest and the Political Economy of Sectarianism in Lebanon," *Global Discourse* 6, no. 4 (2016), 634–49; Jamil Mouawad and Hanness Baumann, "In Search of the Lebanese State," *Arab Studies Journal* 25, no. 1 (2017): 60–64; Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Bassel Salloukh et al., *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Tamirace Fakhoury, "Power-Sharing after the Arab Spring? Insights from Lebanon's Political Transition," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25, no. 1 (2019): 9–26.

14 Hanna Meretoja, "Stop Narrating the Pandemic as a Story of War," *OpenDemocracy*, May 19, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/stop-narrating-pandemic-story-war/.

15 Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

as "a portal." Instead of comparing the pandemic to "war," Roy portrayed it in a way that reminded me of the beginnings of revolutions. She wrote,

> Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.[16]

The pandemic is thus a liminal state, one that creates a rupture with the status quo and opens a possibility for what might unfold later. But what happens when a pandemic hits in the context of an already liminal state: that of an unfolding uprising? How does "double-liminality" unfold? The pandemic became a spatial and temporal limbo that combined the anxiety that accompanies episodes of war (or war anticipation) with the hopefulness for drastic change that comes with moments of revolution. Like war, the "outside" became dangerous. Like revolution, the status quo became unbearable and opened up room for questioning life as we know it. In between these two non-mutually exclusive extremes, the pandemic within the context of Lebanon's financial collapse was lived as both war and revolution, but more importantly as an experience of "standing still" as detached individuals in the middle of a huge tornado that is stronger and bigger than us.

I remember losing my voice during the first weeks of the revolution. Never in my life before had I lost my voice this way. Never in my life before had I felt louder, though. I remember walking to the Riad El Solh square on Saturday, October 19, 2019 after a brief visit to my mother to celebrate her birthday. I was trying to record a WhatsApp voice message to my friend but was unable to finish it because of the hoarseness in my voice. For the past two days, since the start of Lebanon's *Thawra* on the afternoon of October 17, I had been screaming and chanting in the streets from the top of my lungs. The chants of the early days were cathartic: mainly curse words at politicians and a spontaneous framing of our collective mobilization as being a *thawra* – designating a rupture with what was before. Like everyone else, I found myself in the middle of a huge crowd, I could spot some familiar faces around, but the majority were people I didn't know and have never seen at a protest before. It was clear that

16 Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.

something about this moment was different. A certain power was felt from our sheer numbers, a clear break with the status quo was created. Individuals became irrelevant in those big crowds; it was the power of the collective that was taking over. Although I had no voice as an individual, I never felt more heard, more powerful, and more emancipated than during those first few days. It made me think about our predicament under neoliberalism and individualism, and our potential power in collective action. Although the moment was ephemeral, the feeling of being part of a larger crowd brought with it much power and hope. During the lockdown, the violence of going back to being an individual separated from others (physically and "socially" as states around the world framed it) was unbearable. The heavy focus on individual bodies and private spaces stood in stark contrast with the collective and public aspects of the revolution. Although my vocal cords during the plague were intact, I simply did not want to speak. From the private space of my home, behind my screen, in the exhaustion of adapting to a sudden new work environment of teaching online and in the rage of not wanting to accept this new reality where the crackdown on our spaces of dissent became normalized, I found it very difficult to carry on with our efforts to organize – let alone mobilize. How do we move a revolution online? How secure are those platforms we are using to connect? Can we organize from behind our screens? What about those who don't have screens? Or those who are too tired of screens and are unable to cope with more of it? What about our salaries, how will our rights be protected in the context of the free fall of the currency rate? Will we be able to afford food and rent in the coming months? What about informal labor, or "essential workers," are we just going to clap from our balconies in admiration of their labor or will we be able to push for more dignified labor rights for them? Should we move our efforts to providing aid and humanitarian support? Some had started distributing food baskets, while others were providing kits with disinfectants and face masks. I did not find my place in this new reality. In as much as these initiatives are important, to me the revolution was elsewhere. I wanted to pressure the state, the employers, and the oligarchs to pay for this. I did not want us to fill the void of the inequalities and injustices that this system has created. I did not want to accept that they can get away with it this time again. But while my anger was eating my energy up from the inside, I found myself exhausted and anxiously waiting for this mess to finally settle on clearer grounds where the aspects of our new reality will become more pronounced and easier to discern.

In the heat of the Beiruti summer, I woke up from a nap on that lazy August afternoon and headed to my neighborhood coffee shop to meet some friends. I had just arrived and ordered my coffee when the whole world shook. Seconds

later, a massive explosion blew me off my seat, and shattered our city into millions of pieces. Glass, blood, and sirens everywhere. The new reality we were waiting for suddenly became clear and discernable. The Beirut port explosion of August 4 announced the start of a new chapter in our descent into a terribly difficult phase where our struggle against the ruling regime became overshadowed by imperial powers and their navies visible on the Beirut shore. In the complexity of this new geopolitical and economic scene, the uprising has taken a back seat, calmer and less agitated, until it carves a new space for itself in the madness and misery of those times.