

5. EXIT MARX/ENTER IBN KHALDUN

Wartime Disenchantment and Critique

When the community no longer raises objections, there is an end, too, to the suppression of evil passions, and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity so incompatible with their level of civilization that one could have thought them impossible.

—SIGMUND FREUD

Le désespoir est une forme supérieure de la critique.

—LÉO FERRÉ

In *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, Enzo Traverso observes that the significant defeats the Left has suffered in the past did not break the tradition's spine. The hope in a revolutionary utopia, which provided both a historical perspective and a shared horizon of expectation, sustained the tradition through its many defeats. Traverso dates the exhaustion of the tradition's stock of revolutionary hope and the exit of History from the stage with the downfall of the communism:

When communism fell apart, the utopia that for almost two centuries had supported it as a Promethean impetus or consolatory justification was no longer available; it had become an exhausted spiritual resource. The “structure of feelings” of the left disappeared and the melancholy born from defeat could not find anything to transcend it; it remained alone in front of a vacuum. The coming neoliberal wave—as individualistic as it was cynical—fulfilled it.¹

Traverso's canvassing of global political transformations, from Left internationalism to the neoliberal wave, reinscribes the disaggregation of the Left's “structure of feelings” with the end of the Cold War. Similar historiographical markers are also put to use by keen observers of ideological transformations in the Arab world. “The fall of the Soviet Union,” Michaëlle Browers writes, “was a decisive event for socialist forces throughout the world and certainly

Arab socialism is no exception. Much of the political discourse of ‘popular’ democracy, the revolutionary party and Frontal politics, has given way to a more ‘liberal’ discourse of pluralism, human rights and civil society.”² Browers, who is writing more than a decade before Traverso and is focusing on the transformations of political languages in the Arab world, highlights how the problematic of liberal democracy displaced the exhausted family of progressive languages that were preoccupied with revolution. This state of exhaustion not only affected the Marxist tradition as a grid of analysis and a set of conceptual tools but also had a detrimental effect on Marxist-grounded politics. Marxist-Leninist organizations such as Arab communist parties, but not exclusively so, were by the early 1990s shaken by debates revolving around questions ranging from whether they ought to change their names to the relevance of “the dictatorship of the proletariat” in the party’s political agenda as well as measures of democratization internal to the organizations.³

Waddah Charara’s trajectory is doubly contrapuntal vis-à-vis Traverso’s and Browers’s accounts. It presents a very early unraveling, with the beginning of the Lebanese civil and regional wars (1975–90), of the hope generated by the historical perspective of revolutionary utopias. It is also an exit from Marxist militancy and ideology that displaced the question of the political away from the centrality of class politics toward the investigation of the socio-logics and modalities of power of infranational solidarities as he observed the division of the Lebanese masses into their different Christian and Muslim sectarian constituencies. Charara did not substitute one ideology (Marxism) for another (liberalism). Rather, as we will soon see, he examined how the political could not extricate itself from, and carve out, an autonomous sphere outside of communal relations of solidarity. It is not the collapse of communism that eclipsed the faith in History, but the fragmentation of the revolutionary subject along communal lines that foreclosed the possibility of autonomous political practice.

The critical distance Charara took from the warring camps was a very rare move at the time. He was probably the first of his cohort of leftist militants to pay attention to, and theorize, the communal logics—predominantly sectarian, but also regional and kinship based—and the modalities of power at work in the Lebanese civil war and their impact on thick ideological politics. Reinserting his intervention into the problem-space of the 1970s Left before the ebbing away of revolutionary tides reveals to us how divergent his solitary and farsighted diagnosis of the war was from the positions of leftist political parties and former comrades. Charara was a bellwether of sorts for the waves of disenchantment to come of leftist intellectuals around a decade and a half before the fall of the Soviet Union. With the waning power of the Left in the following

years of the war—the Syrian military intervention in 1976, the assassination of Kamal Jumblatt in 1977, the withdrawal of the PLO after the Israeli invasion of 1982, the increasingly inter- and intrasectarian nature of the war, as well as the rise of Islamist political forces—a number of leftist militants would experience successive waves of disenchantment. During his Maoist interlude (1972–75), which witnessed mobilizations and military clashes between the Palestinian resistance and the Lebanese authorities (May 1973), omens of the devastations to come, Charara took stock of a decade of Marxist militancy. His corrosive auto-critique targeted the building blocks on which he, alongside his comrades, sought to inaugurate a revolutionary political project. In brief, the political party he cofounded was no longer the collective agent of emancipation; his militant intellectual comrades no longer constituted a revolutionary vanguard; and revolutionary theory was no longer the royal road to effective practice. Disenchanted with the party, militant intellectuals, and revolutionary theory, Charara turned to Maoism, placing his ultimate militant wager on the masses. Despite the acknowledgment of the difficulty of holding on to a teleology of emancipation, his militant catechesis took the form of a romantic mythologization of the masses, whose revolutionary violence makes History unmediated by the authoritarian apparatuses of the party. Retrospectively, one could map the salient objects of Charara’s revolutionary trajectory before disenchantment and their accompanying practices along the following lines: *revolutionary theory* (Socialist Lebanon, 1964–68, translation/transfiguration); *revolutionary organization* (Socialist Lebanon/OCAL, 1969–71, political union); *revolutionary masses* (*Blue Pamphlet* movement/solo militancy, 1972–75, *établissement*). Waddah Charara, who is of Shi’i descent, was in the first months of the fighting still living on and off in Burj Hammud where he had relocated in 1973 for his *établissement*.

In a country where national consensus is a rare currency, April 13, 1975, stands in for the beginning of the civil and regional wars that lasted until the end of 1990. On that day a car fired shots at a congregation of Phalange partisans in front of a church in ‘Ayn al-Rummana, a Christian suburb east of Beirut. The shootings wounded a number of people, “to which the Phalangist militiamen reacted a few hours later by machine-gunning a bus heading for the Tall al-Za‘tar refugee camp, killing 21 Palestinians. Fighting broke out throughout the southeastern suburb of Beirut between the Phalange and the Palestinian resistance and their Lebanese allies.”⁴ Charara continued to commute between Beirut and Burj Hammud until September 1975. Around the end of the month, on either September 24 or 25, Charara took a cab to Beirut with Fares, his flatmate at the time, leaving everything as is in their apartment.⁵ This proved to be

his last day in Burj Hammud. “Things exploded a bit after that,” he recalls, and “Black Saturday happened . . . and I never saw the apartment again and the books of course. Everything was gone. This [établissement in Burj Hammud] was the last attempt to contact people and to call for something.”⁶ The “Black Saturday” massacre took place on December 6, 1975, when, after discovering the bodies of four young men associated with the right-wing nationalist Phalange Party, Christian militiamen established checkpoints in Beirut, stopping cars, lining up and murdering “some 200 innocent Muslims, mostly port workers.”⁷ On January 18, 1976, the Christian forces attacked Karantina, a northeastern multiethnic (Kurds, Armenians), multinational (Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese), predominantly Muslim working-class suburb under the control of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is contiguous to Burj Hammud. After conquering Karantina, the militias massacred hundreds of civilians. Two days later, the Lebanese National Movement and Palestinian forces attacked the Christian coastal town of Damur south of Beirut, and committed a massacre against its inhabitants. The outbreak of the civil war in the spring of 1975 closed off for good Charara’s nearly two decades of militant life (1958–75): seventeen years of militancy inaugurated on the eve of the 1958 clashes, a stint of radical activism bracketed by two civil wars.

Charara, who was stunned by the sectarian forms of the killing, destruction, and pillaging, began to take stock of the logics governing the wartime practice. In the opening paragraphs of “Hurub al-Istitba‘” (Wars of Subjugation) the opening chapter of a book of essays carrying the same title, (February 1976, hereafter cited as *WS*), he wrote,

Numerous phenomena have come to dominate the surface of our lives in the past ten months, phenomena where blood mixed with cut limbs, and hot ashes with spilled viscera from pierced bellies. . . . Spectators used to close their eyes in horror at the movie theaters whenever [Luis] Buñuel and [Salvador] Dalí’s blade would cut through a cinematic eye in “*An Andalusian Dog*.” We now began tallying sliced eyes. And between one round and another, laughter filled the theaters showing “action movies” with pity: *Bloody Mama* is evil because she killed three or four policemen!⁸

Charara compared the violence, pillaging, and battles in Lebanon from April 1975 to February 1976 with the differential responses of moviegoers to violent scenes in Luis Buñuel’s *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) before the war and Roger Corman’s *Bloody Mama* (1970), shown during the war. They had an audience whose everyday lives had become so exposed to bloodshed that the

meaning of violent scenes in movies was experienced as comic relief. Inasmuch as the radical change in the everyday life of moviegoers had led to their recoding of the movies' original messages, the war would also have a great effect on Charara's theoretical and political positions, his authorial voice, and the location from which he wrote. The sectarian form the violence took in the first few months of the war brought a very early and final disenchantment with the masses as the subjects of History and with emancipation as a horizon of political practice. Charara also radicalized and extended his earlier critique of the OCAI to encompass the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), the front of leftist and Arab nationalist parties, led by Kamal Jumblatt, who fought alongside the Palestinian resistance against the Lebanese nationalist, overwhelmingly Christian, parties.

*The Lebanese National Movement: Parties of Rule
or Parties of Revolution?*

In the fall of 1977, a MERIP writer asked Traboulsi, "Could you give an overview of the Lebanese National Movement?" The LNM, he answered,

seems unique in the Arab world, in that it's the first time any Arab people has come to the defense of the Palestinian resistance. We believe we are unique in that sense, but the defense of the Palestinian revolution is a Lebanese patriotic duty. We have been struggling for years to have Lebanon play its role, and pay its share in the Arab liberation movement and its anti-Zionist struggle. One characteristic of the Lebanese regime prior to the war was a very flagrant contradiction between its economic integration in the Arab world and its political and cultural isolation from the Arab world. We have struggled to put an end to this. The term "isolationist" is scientific, denoting those currents, groups and political forces that believe they can live for the rest of their lives depending economically on the Arab world while isolating themselves politically and culturally.⁹ This isolation has always meant a policy not of independence but of subjugation to Western imperialists.¹⁰

Traboulsi leaned on Socialist Lebanon/Charara's theoretical heritage in reformulating the critique of the Lebanese system put forward in "The Two Resistances" (1969), which now became a centerpiece of the Left's wartime ideological arsenal. He also touched upon the transitional program for reforms proposed by the LNM, which "gives priority to the setting up a secular state and abolishing confessionalism in political representation. This is the most essential demo-

cratic achievement to be struggled for because it affects the interests of the wide Lebanese masses.”¹¹ The transitional program put forward by the Left did not address the socioeconomic question.

Much later Troubsi provides an explanation in his memoir: “Jumblatt did not want to scare the bourgeoisie, and especially its Muslim wing, since he was predicting to win it over to his program of political change; he ended up being disappointed.”¹² Socialist Lebanon’s early analysis of the anxiety generated by the social question in a Lebanese Left dependent on an alliance with powerful political leaders with a sectarian constituency, like Kamal Jumblatt, was, and still is, prescient.

Waddah Charara lambasted the LNM’s proposal for reforming the Lebanese system. In “Reform from the Center” (November 1975), he wrote:

If the masses are supposed to be the water that the militants ought to circulate in with the happiness of the swimming fish, in this case the “masses” in the text are the water that drowns the fish, i.e., the problem. Of what masses is the text talking about? If the question was posed before the last civil war, and notably the last two months (since mid-September), it would have seemed an exaggeration that need not be investigated. But the program seeks to mobilize masses that are sundered by a sectarian civil war as wide as the masses themselves. (*WS*, 117)

Charara in this passage borrowed Mao’s exhortation to militants to relate to the people like a “fish to water” to highlight the gap separating the Left’s ideological languages of representation of a unified revolutionary subject—the masses—and their sectarian divisions. “When the program talks about the ‘Lebanese’ masses’ that are looking forward to a ‘national progressive regime,’” he wrote, “it is in general talking about one group, or one direction within this *Muslim* group” (*WS*, 119). Charara reiterated in this essay his long-standing critique of top-down reform programs, instrumental modes of militancy, and external ones that kept the political outside of, and separate from, the social formation. These external modes of political party militancy, he noted, focused on seizing a share of power “without tackling its foundations, forms, and functions or concentrated on widening power in sectors that the state could not dominate” (*WS*, 132). These political parties, concluded the disenchanting Marxist, are “‘political’ parties, in the narrow sense of the word, i.e., **parties of rule** and not parties of **social revolution**” (*WS*, 132).¹³

Charara’s harsh and minoritarian critique not only separated him politically from Fawwaz Troubsi and Muhsin Ibrahim, who held leadership positions during the war, it also distanced him intellectually from former comrades like

Aziz al-Azmeh, the Syrian historiographer and Islamic studies scholar, who offered a contrasting interpretation of the events.¹⁴ al-Azmeh offers an account that recapitulates again Charara's "The Two Resistances," the theoretical text with multiple political and academic afterlives in both Arabic and English, while arguing against the prominence of sectarian solidarities. "Through the Palestinians," he writes, "the Lebanese entity was reinserted into its Arab context and deprived of that artificial isolation which had hitherto served to maintain the political safeguards necessary for its international economic role."¹⁵ "Attempts to set up sectarian Shi'i organizations were very short lived," al-Azmeh notes:

The "Movement of the Disinherited" of the Imam Musa as-Sadr, as well as his military organization, Fityan Ali, had hardly got beyond a few mass rallies when the Shi'is decided they did not want to star in a bad melodrama and opted for the leadership of men like George Hawi of the CP, a Greek Orthodox from the Matn, or Fawwaz Trab[o]ulsi, of the OCAI, a Catholic from the Southern Biqaa (PF, 62).

Political radicalization did not only occur among the Shi'a but was also at the heart of the transformation of the Sunni community. "Yet it should be noted," al-Azmeh asserts, "that not all of the largely Sunni organizations took this leftward secular and radical trend" (PF, 66). That said, he continues, "such residues of traditional confessionalism are unimportant in any effective sense today yet such movements have participated emotionally and, in some cases, militarily, with the left-wing forces which are grouped around what has been termed the cause of the Palestinians" (PF, 66–7). al-Azmeh's analysis, like Charara's, takes the Lebanese sectarian communities as the units of analysis but draws the opposite conclusion by giving prominence to the ideological factor over the sectarian and to the presence of Christians at the head of communist parties whose body is considerably Shi'i.

The Breakdown of a Common World

In the introduction to *Wars of Subjugation* (1979), Charara writes, echoing Émile Durkheim, that "the war [Lebanese civil war] was a total *social fact* as much as it was a political one, and maybe more so" (*WS*, 10). The essays that are assembled in the book abstracted themselves from the course of events and the political divisions in order to examine "the social dimension (or the socio-historical as Castoriadis says) [which] reveals the unity of the implicit rules that

govern the warring parties and tear Lebanese society apart. . . . for it was not a civil-communal [*abliyya*] battle in vain, and it did not lead to a relative fusion of the different forces into two sectarian groups randomly” (*WS*, 11). The outbreak of the fighting revealed to Charara the close intertwining of the domain of the political with the logics of communal—sectarian, regional, familial—solidarities, which makes the labors of conceptual subsumption and ideological generalization difficult.

The “war,” he observes, was in fact a multiplicity of small, local wars that cannot be subsumed under one general category. In a small country, where the citizens’ sect and place of birth are inscribed on their state IDs, the act of killing, the former militant observes, is a direct unmediated act that targets for the most part “faces, names and belongings” that are well known (*WS*, 231). The fighting that erupted in the different parts of the country did not constitute “one, common war, rather there were as many wars as there were fronts: the war of ‘Ayn al-Rummana-al-Shiyah, the war of Dikwana-Tall al-Za‘tar, the war of Miryata-Irdi, the war of Tripoli-al-Qibba” (*WS*, 231). “If there is no doubt,” Charara affirmed, “that these local wars are nurtured by common political elements, what is sure is that these common factors did not replace the local enmities and did not eliminate the harshness of revenge” (*WS*, 231). “Wars of Subjugation,” will proceed to diagnose the multiple modalities of operation of the communal relations of solidarity, which undermine the possibilities of a politics that rests on a common, unified ideological criteria.

Charara’s diagnosis of the entanglement of the political in the multiple webs of the social fabric leads him to rethink the operations of power in dialogue with Gramsci, whose work he translated, and by reactivating concepts from Ibn Khaldun’s work. The Lebanese civil wars, he registers, reveal that the politics of sects, families, regions, professions, political parties, and Arab regional politics carry heterogeneous, and independent, “codes of internal relations and rules of internal hierarchy” (*WS*, 233). “The difference of criteria and their variety (despite the intertwining of some of them),” he notes, “raises difficult obstacles in the face of power as hegemony and not as dominance” (*WS*, 233). Power qua hegemony presupposes a political leadership that generalizes an encompassing set of criteria that covers multiple professional and administrative spheres, concealing in the process the basis of its power, while dominance is content with an “an external possession of instruments of power: armed forces, administrative apparatuses, a share of production” (*WS*, 233). In his deployment of Gramsci to make sense of wartime practices, Charara is far from positing a stark either-or scenario, where in a particular social formation power either solely operates as hegemony or as

dominance. Power operates differently depending on the different articulations of hegemony/dominance. At the deep end of the spectrum, when hegemony's capacity to generate a "common sense" is at its weakest, and the necessity of direct domination is at its apex, "power takes a form that Ibn Khaldun knew perfectly that of *iltiham* [fusion] and *istitba'* [subjugation]" (*WS*, 233).¹⁶

Gramsci's elaboration of his conceptual arsenal—such as hegemony, historical bloc, war of position, war of maneuver—that Charara drew on during his militant phase 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.¹⁷ Gramsci and Charara were both forging new concepts in the wake of political events that challenged an older theoretical understanding. That said, the Lebanese civil wars, which resulted in the fragmentation of Lebanese society into its infranational—sectarian, regional, kin—components and the breakdown of the Lebanese state, was the obverse of capitalist society's resilience against revolutionary transformation as a result of the moral and intellectual leadership of its dominant class. The external modality of power at work in Lebanese society, a formal dominance, as Charara dubbed it, does not target the internal social bonds of dominated groups. The subjugating power does not seek to fashion new subjectivities. It is content with subjugating a group or a community while leaving their internal relations, hierarchies, and codes intact.

The Lebanese civil wars were attempts at mutual subjugation while none of the warring sides engaged in attempts at interpellating actors from the opposite side of the trenches. Charara proceeds to diagnose the fighters' practices as they relate to land, bodies, and commodities with the foundational trinity of political economy in mind. It is the "deep nature" of the conflict, Charara writes, in reference to its social dimension, that accounts for its "barbarism" (*WS*, 235). In the battle for subjugation, the destruction of the adversary's material and moral forces—primarily its bodies and properties—tops the list of missions to accomplish. "The political body, when dominance [in distinction to hegemony] is in effect," Charara notes, "is not a general abstract labor power that has been emptied of its individuality, its desires, its attachments and had its power to symbolize excised, before turning it into a disciplined tool of production and consumption" (*WS*, 235). Rather, it is "a body in 'solidarity,'" a carrier of both attachments to and detachments from family, sect, and neighborhood (*WS*, 235–36). The personal body, the point of intersections of multiple attach-

ments and detachments, then becomes the site of a semiotic interrogation with the aim of revealing the side it belongs to. In becoming a symbol, it also becomes a body for defacement and mutilation, since what the killers are after in liquidating an individual is his belonging to his sect. Defacement “is a summoning of the sect’s large body” (*WS*, 236).

Concrete communal belongings that mark bodies and property mediate all relationships in a wartorn capitalist society where liquidated individuals are stabbed multiple times and property destroyed. When the body is a stand-in for communal belongings, commodities become part of “the owner’s body (the owner = the sectarian group). The owner is therefore not addressed from the perspective of his position vis-à-vis power and production, and their relations” (*WS*, 236). As for land, it acquired in the conflict a “mythological ‘place’” that took the form, more predominant on the Christian side, of cleansing it from “the ‘foreign’ patches that contaminate the pure metal” (*WS*, 237). Here, too, Charara emphasizes, that what was at work in the sectarianization of geography was not solely interest driven, functional, and pragmatic practices that are part and parcel of winning a battle. “Expulsion,” he writes, “comes hand in hand with all forms of abuse, and humiliation, and the symbol regains its power and efficacy: bulldozers are used so that there is not a single wall—not even a tin wall—left standing, and empty, fissured houses are burned down by a purifying fire so that no trace of impurity is left” (*WS*, 237).

Charara’s interpretations of wartime violence, which combined ideology, politics, and economics with magical and ritualistic behaviors—killing and defacing; looting and destroying; evicting and burning down to purify—led him to call into question the distinctions of social theory that are built on separating these spheres from each other. Charara noted that these distinctions—say, between magic/ritual and capitalist economies/ideological politics—are not suitable to analyzing the situation. “We were summoning up capitalist distinctions,” he added, “without any critique or differentiation (even if they reached us through Marxism)” (*WS*, 238). Note that in this passage he did not refer to these distinctions as Western, modern, or Enlightenment, but as capitalist, ones. The form of Charara’s critiques of Eurocentrism, like his earlier one in *Origins*, is less to show how the “universal” categories of history, social theory, and political economy cannot escape their European origins.¹⁸ Rather, faced with the urgent question of how to interpret wartime violence, he begins by criticizing social theory’s binary distinctions before turning to forging a new conceptual universe.

Departure from Marxist Grounds

Charara reactivated Ibn Khaldun's concepts to account for how power operates during the Lebanese civil wars, but it was Marx that predominantly supplied the theoretical ground for why it did so. His account of the multiple and heterogeneous foci of power at work in Lebanon that foreclose the possibility of articulating a political project that abstracts itself from these sites, generalizing in the process a set of common criteria, was not a return of sorts to a theory of the essentialist culturalist attributes of Arab societies, or a historicist move emphasizing the persistence of precapitalist remainders in the present. "Is capitalism's metal (and its parliamentary democracy) different from the one the people of the backwards country, their relationships, and their world, are made [of]?" "The matter is not sure," he answers (*WS*, 239). The entanglement of the political in the social was not an account of a failed, or backward, modernity but the form modernity took in Lebanon:

Sectarianism, familialism, and regionalism were not the "remainders" of precapitalist social relations. And while all of them were based on elements that predate capitalism, they only rose to prominence in organizing social and political life inside the movement of capitalist expansion on the one hand, and inside the formation of the Lebanese state with its frontiers, administration and hierarchies on the other hand. (*WS*, 250)

The former Marxist militant elaborated an account of the working of Lebanese capitalism that underlined the relative autonomy of small-time producers and the processes of formal subsumption of labor that boosted communal relations of solidarity by incorporating them into the relations of production. Capitalist production in Lebanon was wary of "uprooting the artisan or the peasant from their relations [of production] and from 'liberating' these producers from them" (*WS*, 239). The reason why capitalism did not eliminate the world of artisan labor and small and family-owned farming by transforming them into wage laborers "was not, of course, [because of] the sentiments of capital and its compassion." Rather, it was because the artisan and the peasant "own an effective tool of pressure on the landowner and through him on the apparatuses of rule and its politics" (*WS*, 239). If the landlord's family wishes to play any political role, it has to "grant, even if partially, peasants' demands, whether related to leasing the land or taking charge of its crops" (*WS*, 240). "Moreover, the bourgeoisie," wrote Charara, moving from the peasant-landlord relation into analyzing the constitutive features of Lebanese capitalism, "resorts to expand its sphere of exchange and to break the link that ties production

to local consumption (through developing commercial capital) without resorting to stripping the peasant and the artisan of their means of production, and without paying an exorbitant political and ideological price for it, which is the formulation of a sharp class consciousness" (*WS*, 240).¹⁹ The Lebanese commercial bourgeoisie therefore did not extract its surplus at the point of production, which was done by "autonomous" producers, but in the sphere of circulation and marketing under its control, such as by exporting to neighboring Arab countries. In the case of both the landlord-peasant relation and the bourgeois-worker relation, capital's Lebanese path did not "free" the laborers from everything but selling their labor power. Lebanese peasants and artisans retained some degree of control over their means of production, which therefore preempted the development of class consciousness.

Moreover, production units are characterized by "a weak division of labor," which means that the "labor of abstraction that capitalism performs on social relations and on labor power specifically is still preliminary" (*WS*, 243). Labor still relied on an artisanal unit of production and "the worker, in this case," added Charara, "is not transformed into an 'appendage' to the machine or production" (*WS*, 243). Therefore, inherited skill still plays its role and "the village (and kinship generally) has retained its function in professional preparation" (*WS*, 243). The dominant social relations, Charara wrote, have moved from society into the units of production, as in the cases when Lebanese capitalists make use of family hierarchies by "appointing a small-time notable in his family or village as a foreman in the factory supervising one of its divisions. And the small notable will participate in choosing some of his divisions' workers from his family or clan" (*WS*, 245). This resulted in controlling worker absenteeism and confrontations with factory owners through family relations. Moreover, the Lebanese bourgeoisie makes use of sectarianism to pit workers against each other, as when "using certain workers [from a different sect] as supervisors over others . . . and distributing wage benefits along sectarian lines; increasing wages along sectarian belonging . . . and this way, part of the workers is controlled and the other subjugated" (*WS*, 245). Therefore, "the (Lebanese) bourgeois organization of labor" concluded Charara, "consolidates at the end of the day the relations of solidarity that it seeks to subjugate" (*WS*, 245). And "if this subjugation is an essential element in its [bourgeois organization of labor] strategy, it is also simultaneously," Charara wrote, "an essential element in the workers' resistance to capitalist relations of production. And this is because subjugation preserves the familial and sectarian relations of solidarity" (*WS*, 245). While Charara noted how these relations of solidarity, which are used to control and divide workers by the bourgeoisie, work also in the opposite direction to re-

sist the latter, recapitulating his analysis in *The Blue Pamphlet* (1973), he did so in the wake of the civil war as a detached social scientist in a constative manner. The days of militancy are over.

In the following section, entitled “Solidarity Relations against Capitalism and the State,” the author wrote as if he had just realized that his analysis—springing from a Marxist ground and addressing privileged political economy themes—was entangled in what he was in the process of leaving behind. He wrote: “These phenomena [relations of solidarity] are not restricted to the domain of production (and if we emphasized their effectiveness in this particular domain, it is because this domain is privileged in the official leftist analysis, fostering deep-seated political illusions). Rather, they surpass it [the domain of production] to [affect] the different aspects of social life” (*WS*, 246).²⁰ That done, Charara proceeded to explore the other manifestation of these strengths and transformations of the relations of solidarity, such as in Lebanese modern cities that rearticulated the function of *iltiham* (fusion) that keeps family, and group units, cohesive, by inscribing it within a market, “which is not only different by its extension from the past one, but also in the tendency of economic values to dominate, and in its internal hierarchization depending on the relation with imperial centers, and by its inscription within state relations” (*WS*, 247).

Charara’s diagnosis of the Lebanese state paralleled the one he put forward about capitalist production. The loyalty to the state remained a “formal” one that does “not touch the internal relations of these groupings, and does not work on changing their forms and logics, despite the transformations it effects on their general function” (*WS*, 251). This “formal adherence” had serious consequences for the state, which had to share its citizens’ loyalty and its sovereignty on its own territory with

the leaders of family-regional-sectarian groups and their blocs, with the *millet* blocs and their councils and institutions (hospitals, property and schools), with the armed wings of these blocs (armed clans, armed strongmen, militias), in addition to the ruler’s retinue, and the agents or friends of civilian and military apparatuses that are concerned with “general” security, i.e., the sharing of allegiances leads to the sharing of organized and legitimate violence with the state—which is the one that “should” monopolize this violence, in a legal framework that generalizes the European experience. (*WS*, 251–52)

It was in opposition to this *common* modality of power that governs and divides Lebanese society and reaches its maximal limits in times of civil war that Charara proposed, fleetingly, without much elaboration, the *logic* of the state:

“and one cannot transition from the logic of subjugation to the logic of the state but through a different socio-historical foundation” (*WS*, 12). The former Maoist militant retains his apprehension of top-down politics, however. Transitioning to the logic of the state cannot be the result of a political imposition from above. The problem is that this sentence does not designate a subject that could potentially lay this new foundation.

Charara’s formulation of the question of the social fabric primarily in the guise of sectarianism in the beginning of the civil war not only entailed the acknowledgment of the primacy of these communal solidarities in the face of ideological programs. More importantly, it attempted to underscore how these forms of solidarity were transformed historically and produced and reproduced in the present. “Killing, pillaging, defacing, and destroying,” Charara underscored, “are at the heart of our contemporary ‘traditions and habits’ . . . and are not remainders from the past but are constitutive of the present we build every day” (*WS*, 230). *Wars of Subjugation* was a hard-hitting intervention against the attempts of the Right and the Left to evade responsibility for sectarian violence that drew on nationalist/culturalist and historicist registers, such as these acts are not part of “our traditions”; these are “mistakes” on the way to building bright futures; these are a consequence of “precapitalist remainders” that will soon melt into thin air.

In *Origins* (1975), the Lebanese sectarian structure was the paradoxical outcome of the masses’ political practice, while in *Wars of Subjugation* the political could not escape the communal—sectarian, regional, and family—structure.²¹ In order to avoid falling back on a metaphysical cultural essentialism that reifies sectarianism, Charara, as we just saw, emphasizes the modernity of these relations and grounds his account in a Marxian account of Lebanese capitalism’s trajectory—formal subsumption—and the formation of Lebanon’s sectarian state, as well as the rearticulation of these forms of solidarity in the wake of rural-urban migrations and their insertion in a capitalist economy. The arguments of the two books can be schematically represented in the following way. *Origins*: masses/hegemony/diachrony/history, and *Wars of Subjugation*: social fabric/dominance-subjugation/synchrony/structure.

Charara’s works right before and right after the war articulate two notions of the political that are in tension with each other. The first is a celebration of the masses’ autonomous political practice that remakes their world as it refashions their own subjectivities. It is a romantic, populist notion that highlights the primacy, autonomy, and creativity of political practice from below. It is anchored in a critique of the division between manual and intellectual labor and of top-down and instrumental politics, whether carried out by states, left-

ist parties, organizations, or experts. The second notion, which is implicitly articulated in *Wars of Subjugation*, pits the logic of the state against the civil war's logic of subjugation. It reasserts the need for a politics that is grounded in common criteria that rise above the particularities of infranational communal solidarities. Ahmad Beydoun captured Charara's oscillation between a militant celebration of the autonomy of the political against the instrumental top-down practice of organizations and a disenchanting observation of its entanglement in the social fabric in the title of his review of *Wars of Subjugation*: "Waddah Charara: 'The Democracy' of the State or 'The Depth' of Freedom?"²² Beydoun returned to, and rearticulated, Charara's oscillation as one between "*la politique-expression*" (a politics-as-expression) of the revolutionary subjects' practice and "*la politique-maîtrise*" (politics-as-mastery) of the murderous infranational divisions of the social fabric by a transcendent state.²³

*From Zahi Cherfan to Waddah Charara: Death of an Organic
Intellectual, Birth of a Şu'lūk*

The opening passage of *Wars of Subjugation*, in its literary tone, its references to Buñuel, Dalí, and *Bloody Mama*, bears witness to a departure in form, content—the artistic references—and the locus of enunciation in the writings of one of the most influential New Left Marxist militant intellectuals of his generation. In October 1974, seven months before the outbreak of the civil war, Zahi Cherfan—Waddah Charara's pseudonym—wrote the following:

Just from enumerating some of the new phenomena [one can realize] the extent of actual victories that the student movement achieved in facing the authorities. Some of its elements, in Beirut, Baalbek, Saida, Tyre, Nabatieh and Tripoli no longer bother with the democratic legality and its interior minister. These elements no longer stand vulnerable in the face of oppression forces trained by the authorities to exert direct bodily violence, and no longer believe that violence is a monopoly of the reactionary authorities in the service of stability, the hotels, and the factory owners. (*WS*, 147)²⁴

In this passage, Charara evaluated a certain line of action undertaken by the student movement, while taking it "upon himself to rectify 'deviations'" in its path.²⁵ Less than a year before the outbreak of the war, his coordinates on the political plane are precise. Charara/Cherfan is writing from a militant leftist position, critically assessing the movement so that its actions may yield more fruitful results in the future. The militant imagined his community of readers

and the role his written interventions were predicated to play. Ahmad Beydoun outlined the contours of the militant position Cherfan/Charara occupied: “There is a good thing that is starting and we have to make sure to put it on the right track. . . . Obstacles on the way are numerous, and the errors we committed and those we may commit are likely not the product of chance. . . . But it is unacceptable that our efforts come to an end . . . or to put it briefly ‘there is always something that can be done’ (Sartre).”²⁶ Beydoun, who also withdrew from leftist practice at the beginning of the war, alluded to how Charara’s militant position “exact[s] from the text a heavy theoretical price,” noting that it “seems forced to ‘pave’ the ground under the feet of the student movement to the extent of surprising whoever reads ‘Wars of Subjugation.’”²⁷

Charara’s earlier prewar essays, either unsigned or written under his pseudonym, were activist interventions. They were analyses of specific situations geared toward either evaluating a certain line of action or formulating political positions, and at times they were used as theoretical education texts. When writing was in the direct service of the people’s cause, it de facto excluded certain subjects and forms that might detract from the pressing and primordial political task. It left no room for the militant writer to dabble in analogies, artistic references, and a prose that might eat away at its political yield by distracting the reader. Linguistic “flourish” may detract from the seriousness of the matter, relegating the militant to the status of an intellectual who tinkers with culture in distinction to a revolutionary who formulates political positions. Moreover, Charara adds, “Why use these metaphors when you were convinced that analysis that takes for its base economics and grand transformations is self-sufficient? Its intelligibility is within it. So why borrow and use analogies from other fields like cinema, theater, poetry?”²⁸

One of the first pieces Charara wrote after he put an end to militancy was a text in two parts relating his experience as a public school teacher. It weaves together autobiographical threads, an analysis of the Lebanese educational system, and a close observation of the minutiae of power relations inside schools as well as insightful comparisons between schools and political parties.²⁹ We have come a long way from the unsigned articles of Socialist Lebanon. Not only did Charara’s prose become denser with analogies, casting a much wider net of references, but he also moved from not signing texts at all and using a pseudonym to writing autobiographical pieces. Engaging in this genre of writing would have been unimaginable, or, if that is too strong, unlikely only a few months earlier, when he was still one foot soldier of History, albeit a distinguished one, among others.³⁰ Wartime disenchantment established the conditions of possibility of thinking and writing about his personal and collective

pasts, distilling experiences into texts as well as venturing into new registers of political analysis, subjects, and styles of writing.³¹

In “Marxism and Form,” a review essay mostly addressing *Spectrum*, a collection of texts by Perry Anderson, Stefan Collini observes how in the 1960s and 1970s, when “it was possible for Anderson and his collaborators to believe that history was on their side, that the proper union of intellectual labor and working class militancy would help bring about the socialist supersession of capitalism,” Anderson’s writing “did not feel the need to make any concessions to those who were uninitiated theoretically or unsympathetic politically.”³² “The task was too urgent,” he adds, “the stakes too high, and in any case the ‘bourgeois’ media were too complicit with capitalism and its political outriders.”³³ While these essays retain their brilliance today, Collini continues, “one cannot help noticing how the whiff of sectarianism, of laying down the ‘correct’ line *now* hangs about some of these articles like stale cigarette smoke.”³⁴ In going over Anderson’s trajectory, Collini, the intellectual historian, notes that with the changes in the political landscape taking place in the 1980s and 1990s, a time when it became much less convincing to think that history was on one’s side, Anderson “appears to have undergone something of a political or intellectual crisis . . . leading not just to reassess the prospects of the left in a world dominated by neo-liberalism but also, one may infer, to reconsider the function of his own writing.”³⁵ He then asks, “Yet to what readership, so much of the world having changed, does Anderson now address himself, and from what vantage point, so many of the old doctrinal certainties having shriveled, does he now write?” Collini answers, “Olympian universalism,” a designation that he sees fitting Anderson’s commitment to Enlightenment reason and the scope of his work. Anderson is a “universalist in the geographical as well as philosophical sense, attending impartially to developments in all parts of the world.”³⁶

Collini’s review reminds us that transformations in intellectual labor accompanying the ebbing away of the 1960s revolutionary tides are not an exclusively Arab affair. Having said that, if Anderson reinvented himself as an Olympian universalist, for whom and from where was Charara writing after his disenchantment? The first person plural Charara uses throughout *Wars of Subjugation* is, to say the least, problematic. Who does this fictitious “we” refer to? It cannot refer to the Lebanese Left since he is overtly critical of it. Moreover, his exit from the Left was not accompanied by a right-wing conversion. To put this loss of identification in the words of Ahmad Beydoun, whose ties to Charara were strong at the time, “we were forced,” he recalls, “as a result of the *diagnosis* to take a great distance from the National and Palestinian camp, and of course [regarding] the other camp [the right-wing and Christian parties] it was taken

for granted. So, we found ourselves . . . against all sides. Very early on, there was an impossibility of identification with any of the sides in the war, because of the war itself.”³⁷

The shift from class-based investigations into the conceptualization of communal relations of solidarity led to a reconfiguration of Charara’s style of critical analysis, his theoretical universe, his horizon of expectation, and his redefinition of the function of intellectuals. It dislocated power from its previous possessors, the dominant classes and the state, to lodge it in the logic of the social fabric. The Lebanese civil war ended the militants’ wagers on designating a revolutionary subject that will carry out the task of emancipation. The acknowledgment of the incapacity to carry out an autonomous, common political project that is not enmeshed in the logics of communal solidarity signaled the unraveling of a utopian future of emancipation as the horizon of expectation of political practice.³⁸ Consequently, Charara developed a form of immanent critique and rearticulated the role of the intellectual in congruence with the substitution of class by community. The critic is the one who took up the role of “unmasking subjugation whenever it is cloaked with ‘modern’ ideologies or *asala* [authenticity]” (*WS*, 12). This rearticulation of the role of intellectuals as unmaskers of the logics of practice that lie beneath the surface of political discourse, regardless of its ideological colors, led to a stance of “permanent critique.” This is not, he asserts, because of an incapacity “to be ‘positive,’ but because it is hard to articulate division and contradiction in the language of *belonging* that shortly after will turn into multiple oratory arts: laudation, eulogy and satire” (*WS*, 12). “The war,” recalls Ahmad Beydoun, “very early on revealed itself to be a new situation, a new story, a new logic. It was over [for us]. We could not work in this situation, so we started to become ‘individuals’ (*afrad*), we disbanded, and each of us, approximately, became by himself.”³⁹

In the opening paragraph of his review of *Wars of Subjugation*, Beydoun highlighted the minoritarian position occupied by Charara who “stands alone in a desolate tight spot,” who does not abide by the rules of production of Lebanese political discourses. “For amongst the protocols of competition in this field—cluttered with dullness,” adds Beydoun sarcastically, “is that the valiant knight does not stand aside, but always in a *known group*, never reaching the battleground having forgotten his father’s name, because he has to declare his lineage before attacks and retreats: ‘I am Ali son of Hussein son of Ali. . . .’ And Waddah Charara has no lineage . . . or at least he declares that what he is saying cannot be spoken in the ‘language of affiliation.’”⁴⁰ Beydoun’s text brought out the solitary and impossible position Charara occupied by writing from a

nonaffiliated position in the first years of the war, noting the refusal of engagement with his work. Lebanese political languages, he wrote “are fences, and no one is interested in getting closer to another—through dialogue—or bringing him closer. . . . And Zayd’s son and ‘Amr’s son may fight and later become like brothers again. However, neither fighting nor fraternizing owes anything to the rhymes [*ahajiz*] they exchange between them.”⁴¹ Beydoun reactivated the vocabulary of Arab patrilineal lineages to describe the fragmentation of shared spaces and idioms of public discourse, when in times of war texts like a coat of arms bear the insignia of the “tribe.” The passing of the “masses” went hand in hand with those who seek to represent them, the family of organic and vanguardist intellectuals. The organic intellectual was dead and replaced by the tribe’s poet singing his kin’s glories. Charara and Ahmad Beydoun were among the first of this cohort of militant intellectuals to become “individualized” in reference to their double dissent from their leftist political parties and their communities. They refused, after their disenchantment with the Left, to retreat into the fold of sectarian identities, which would have entailed for both of them to start writing as Shi‘i intellectuals, not necessarily from within the religious Shi‘i tradition but from within the sectarian perspective of the community’s interests.

In his historiographical magnum opus, Beydoun associated the standpoint of the critical historian who does not seek to write Lebanese history from the standpoint of his own community with that of the *sa‘alik* in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic era. If Charara’s sociological immanent critique took the form of unmasking the logics of subjugation that are cloaked in a multiplicity of ideological languages, whether secular or religious, Beydoun’s develops a historical form. The critical historian in his reading is the one who steers away from writing a history whose matrix is the “ego-ideal” of the community. Immanent historical critique is another name for the disjunction between the community’s own narrative of itself and the historian’s account. This disjunction, writes Beydoun, “transforms the historian into an individual; that is, into a *su‘luk*, in the old tribal terminology. We prefer the term *su‘luk* to ‘citizen,’ which was invented by the French Revolution.” This is because in Beydoun’s account the labor of abstraction that produces the “citizen” through abstracting him from his attachments, and inserting him in a world of interchangeable citizens, did not take place. This individual qua historian is the exception and not the norm, which makes him a *su‘luk*. That said, continues Beydoun, “he did not fall from a cloud. He finds his place of birth in a relatively recent social sphere; this lumpen-State (the actual State) that is at the crossroads of the communitarian lines of struggle, and that tends, in reality or ideally, to separate itself from these

lines. The communitarian historian weaves a totally smooth, total myth. The individual-historian is led by his methodology to put his finger on the fault lines of communitarian myths.”⁴²

Beydoun provides an alternative genealogy of the critical, dissenting “individual-historian” away from an account of modernity that emphasizes the coming into being of a society characterized by abstraction, commensurability, and interchangeability whose political form entails equality between citizens. The shape of Lebanon’s postcolonial modernity renders the “individual-historian,” who is the product of the modern “Lumpen State,” closer to the pre-Islamic *sa’alik*, outcasts who, either by choice or expulsion, were no longer members of their tribes. Beydoun’s association of the critic with the individual *qua* *su’luk*, in the wake of Marxist disenchantment, is the Lebanese answer to Anderson’s “Olympian universalism.” It urges us to inquire into the political, social, and economic conditions of possibility of adopting an “Olympian universalism.” Another way of putting this is to ask, from where can you adopt an Olympian position? And to whom? The critic as *su’luk* is another acknowledgment of the difficulty of articulating a critical discourse that could assume a hegemonic function in a wartorn, communally divided country, where there are no “citizens” and no common political community.

In Charara’s case as well, the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of criteria of power, which work according to the logic of subjugation and preempt the formation of a hegemonic political Left, steered his critical project in new directions and into new forms of articulating critique. In the wake of his observation of the failure of political abstraction and commensurability, and the incongruity of wartime practices with the categories of social and political theory, Charara relinquished the labors of theoretical abstraction that seek to conceptually subsume the discourses and practices it studies. This new modality of critique builds on Charara’s Maoist phase, during which he also discovered the empirical richness of al-Jabarti’s historical works, which clearly revealed to him the poverty of the theoretical discourses of towering contemporary Arab thinkers—such as Abdallah Laroui—and scholars of the Arab world who sought to subsume a very rich, contingent, and contradictory history under a few concepts.⁴³ In the wake of the war and his exit from militantism, he leaned on his Jabartian-Maoist heritage to fashion a form of immanent critique that confronted the coherence of the self-proclaimed discourses of political parties and communities with the contingency and multiplicity of historical events, discourses, logics, and practices that fashioned them. This form of immanent critique, as it is put to use, for instance, in Charara’s detailed work of historical sociology on the formation and rise of Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shi’i militant party,

and its ensuing clout over its community bears a number of traits in common with Nietzschean/Foucauldian genealogies.⁴⁴ It seeks to disrupt the coherence of the account the group, in this case the Shi'i Islamist military party, gives of itself, emphasizing contingent events that led to its formation, destabilizing the certainties of the group's own version of its rise and subsequent achievements. In brief, it seeks to emphasize the contingent, historical, prosaic elements in contrast to the heroic and epic dimensions in the Islamist political party's own self-image.

Charara's texts are notoriously difficult partly because of the author's methodological dictate to stay as close as possible to the thickness and dispersion of the materials he is working with. It is a reflexive method that strives toward finding the most adequate form to represent the modern transformations and fragmentations of societies divided by communal solidarities. If political universals, in the form of hegemonic projects, are preempted by proliferating logics of subjugation that tear states, societies, and institutions apart, preventing the formation of a totality, then it would be difficult to apprehend the state of division through a set of abstract universal concepts that pretend to subsume these incommensurable multiplicities. The end product is a chameleonic language that is differently colored by the language and internal references of the materials it is working through. Ibn 'Arabi's precept "Know your God, the Knowledge of a Chameleon" became one of Charara's methodological guiding lights.⁴⁵

Orphans of the revolution, Charara and Beydoun became Lebanese citizens in a wartorn polis and "public intellectuals," without a public at the beginning of the war. Their early disenchantment and articulation of the centrality of communal solidarities during the civil war raises historiographical, theoretical, and political questions. First, it calls into question the predominant historiographical signposts that are deployed in writing histories of the international and Arab Left that seek to ground their narratives in landmarks that supposedly parallel the internationalism of the tradition and those events that are elevated to the rank of global events—the implosion of the Soviet Union. These sweeping narratives associated their global historiographical markers with grand ideological shifts as well: Marxism to liberal democracy or to neoliberalism.

Second, it raises the theoretical question of where do you fashion a critical project from, and how you do it, once you acknowledge that community is the problem, so to speak, without becoming a liberal, like some of their former comrades. The sociological and historical immanent critiques they formulated retained at their core Marx's commitment to the formulation of a reflexive

critique. Unlike liberalism's grounds of persuasion, which rest on a belief in the context-less universalism of reason, the Marxian tradition emphasized that the persuasiveness of ideas "depended on historical and situational factors like *class*."⁴⁶ It is the Marxian tradition's "emphasis on the social mediation of rational plausibility" that generates its deep theoretical engagement with the question of translation, which, through its theoretical mapping of a society's mode of production, social structure, and so on, ought to guide emancipatory political practice.⁴⁷ In noting that community displaced class as the main category of social mediation, they inhabited the difficult position where they couldn't fall back on a liberal celebration of context-less reason, while their own theorization also foreclosed the possibility of Marxist emancipatory political practice. It is this attachment to reflexivity after the passing of revolutionary hopes that makes them, to me at least, more sophisticated and interesting than Arab and non-Arab Marxists who, like Perry Anderson, retreated to an Olympian universalism and a defense of abstract, context-less reason against authoritarianism and religious politics.

In becoming critics of communal relations of subjugation and the mythohistories Lebanese communities spin about themselves, their reflexive critical practices, which took stock of their diagnosis of the difficulty of economic and political abstraction, moved away from critical theory's powers of conceptual subsumption. Their critiques became increasingly distant from the critical theory that they spent the past two decades of their lives reading, translating, and writing. Paradoxically, it is their commitment to reflexivity and to diagnosing the contours of their present, which they developed during Socialist Lebanon's days, that contributed to marginalizing them from the cosmopolitan world of traveling theory, as they increasingly articulated critique in a sociological and historical mode. This is why I focused on *Wars of Subjugation* and Beydoun's sharp reading of it. This volume marks Charara's initial movement away from Marxist concepts and into his Khaldunian-inspired analysis of the logics of operation of communal solidarities. In it one detects the movement of thought at critical hinge-moments, when the labor of beginnings, of clearing the conceptual ground, and making the case for a new interpretive idiom is performed on the ground of, and by engaging, the earlier—Marxian—one. The traces of these labors would soon vanish from view, erasing the historicity of the problem-space from what would become a normalized paradigm had initially emerged.

Last but not least, their diagnosis raises questions that still plague Lebanese political practice. If community is the main category of social mediation, and the logics of subjugation are still at work to varying degrees depending on the

local, regional, and international conjunctures between the different communities, then engaging in politics always entails deciding whether practice ought to be articulated from within these communities' boundaries while relying on their solidarities, or outside of them, like the 1960s Left half attempted to do. I say half because its autonomy was compromised with its alliance with the more powerful Kamal Jumblatt, who had a double life, one inside and the other outside the Lebanese sectarian system. Jumblatt's duality was nicely captured by a distinguished representative of the prewar establishment's political club. In the aftermath of the last parliamentary elections before the war (1972), Saeb Salam, four-time prime minister of Lebanon, said of Jumblatt, who was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize by the Soviet Union (1972): "We welcome Kamal Jumblatt, the son of the noble Lebanese house and the leader of the esteemed sect [the Druze]. We, however, utterly refuse to deal with him as a promoter of strikes and sabotage and the protector of the Left and communism, and the exploiter of popular causes."⁴⁸

*Coda—Marxism in Crisis: Antitotalitarianism, Nationalism,
and Post-Marxism*

The first years of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 coincided with the antitotalitarian moment in the French intellectual field that cut short the leftist and Third Worldist militancy of the 1960s' shifting intellectual and political preoccupations to the support of dissenters from the Soviet Union and issues of human rights. In *Wars of Subjugation* Charara digressed a little from the diagnosis of wartime violence to ironically note that if the capitalist metropolises practiced their "barbarism in 'Sun My' or 'My Lai,' that's imperialism. . . . The Archipelagoes of political concentration on the other hand do not concern us, for we are in the national democratic phase, and we befriend those who befriend us, like Vietnam" (*WS*, 227).⁴⁹ I was intrigued by the use of "Archipelagoes" in this fleeting critique of the Left's silence on the violence perpetrated by its own camp, and whether it was a reference to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Charara, it turned out, had read the book on his rooftop in Burj Hammud as soon as it came out in French, during his years of Maoist militancy (June 1974).⁵⁰ The publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* had a tremendous effect on France's intellectual field:

Unable to ignore so unimpeachable a source, Dreyfus and Dostoevsky in one, non-Communist intellectuals underwent a Damascene conversion. The scales fell from their eyes, exposing them not only to the true

enormity of “real socialism,” but to the realization that the worm was in the bud. Not Stalin or Lenin, but Marx—and, in a flight backwards, Hegel and Rousseau (possibly Plato)—was the progenitor of the *univers concentrationnaire*. Contra Sartre, [Raymond] Aron, Camus and Castoriadis had been right all along.⁵¹

The “gulag effect” was spearheaded by former militant intellectuals of different generations. Both Claude Lefort (1924–2010), a student of Merleau-Ponty’s and cofounder with the Greek polymath and revolutionary Cornelius Castoriadis of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1949–65), and the younger André Glucksmann (1937–2015), member of *La Gauche Prolétarienne* (1968–73), produced book-long essays on Solzhenitsyn.⁵² The two commentaries “reprimanding other intellectuals for not listening to Solzhenitsyn, and developing political philosophies proclaimed in his name . . . were highly influential in the developing critique of totalitarianism.”⁵³ The Solzhenitsyn years, from the mid- to late 1970s, left their mark on newspapers (*Le Nouvel Observateur*), journals (*Esprit*), and scholarly works such as that of the anthropologist Pierre Clastres and on François Furet’s influential *Penser La Révolution Française* (1978).⁵⁴ Michel Foucault’s oeuvre also stands witness to the mood of the age. The first edition of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975) “compares the Gulag and the West’s disciplinary institutions, which he describes as an ‘archipel carcéral.’”⁵⁵ The new media “stars,” a number of whom were former ’68ers, of this anti-Marxist intellectual movement who became known as “les nouveaux philosophes” made the cover story of *Time Magazine* in the autumn of 1977 with the title “Marx Is Dead,” the international press “betraying evident pleasure at the discovery (at long last!) of a group of young, handsome and militantly anti-Marxist French intellectuals.”⁵⁶

Back in Beirut, the circuits of traveling revolutionary theory and militants were also interrupted, although it was less as a result of theoretico-political waves. The fragmentation of the subject and agent of revolution along communal lines and the resurgence of identitarian binaries in the wake of the Iranian Revolution foreclosed both the politics of internationalist solidarity and the mediation between theory and practice that the earlier practices of translation and transfiguration had enabled. A decade had passed since the Marxist and anticolonial publications published by Maspero were read, discussed, and translated by eager twenty-something men and women in Socialist Lebanon circles. In the early 1980s, François Maspero ended up selling his publishing house, which became Éditions la Découverte, after he stipulated that the name

be changed. The internationalist circuit of Left traveling militants also came to a halt. The Dziga Vertov Group, which included the Swiss-French director Jean-Luc Godard, spent three months in 1970 shooting in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in preparation for a film in support of the revolution that was to be titled “Til Victory: Thinking and Working Methods of the Palestinian Revolution.” It was commissioned, and partially funded, by the Information Service Bureau of Fatah. In mid-1980s Beirut, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the defeat of the Palestinian resistance (1982), and the increasing inter- and intracommunal divisions, circulating was fraught with many more dangers for westerners, including potential kidnappings by the newly formed Islamist groups.

These political transformations, which had started to bring the earlier decades of Marxist internationalist militancy to an end, were not confined to the Arab or Muslim worlds. In the first lines of *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson, working from another part of the world, revealed how nationalism, one of the perennial thorns in Marxism’s side, had made another cut in the leftist internationalist fabric:

Perhaps without being much noticed yet, a fundamental transformation in the history of Marxism and Marxist movements is upon us. Its most visible signs are the recent wars between Vietnam, Cambodia and China. These wars are of world-historical importance because they are the first to occur between regimes whose independence and revolutionary credentials are undeniable, and because none of the belligerents has made more than the most perfunctory attempts to justify the bloodshed in terms of a recognizable *Marxist* theoretical perspective.⁵⁷

The globally interconnected world, united by the ideological coordinates of emancipation from capitalism and imperialism and fashioned by the internationalist solidarity networks of militants and the labors of conceptual transfiguration, had begun its disintegration from different corners.

Charara’s wartime theory of the difficulty of achieving hegemony in societies that are deeply divided along communal lines, where it is difficult to separate political practice from the social foundations on which it rises, reveals the limits of post-Marxist theories that, in the mid-1980s, supplemented the last great Marxist debates of the 1970s. These theories, and here I have in mind Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s distinguished contributions, sought to move beyond a class essentialism by deconstructing and reactivating Marxist categories and dissociating the notion of antagonism from its class referent.⁵⁸ As a result, the political actors and social movements that

can potentially carry out emancipatory struggles have been multiplied, beyond the contradiction between Labor and Capital and the proletariat as the presupposed universal subject of revolution. Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical project rested on asserting the autonomy of political activity and a hegemony that constituted a politically specific universality as a result of a contingent articulating practice:

As we argue, only one particularity whose body is split, for without ceasing to be its own particularity, it transforms its body in the representation of a universality transcending it (that of the equivalential chain). This relation, by which a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it, is what we call a hegemonic relation. As a result, its universality is a contaminated universality: (1) it lives in this unresolvable tension between universality and particularity; (2) its function of hegemonic universality is not acquired for good but is, on the contrary, always reversible. Although we are no doubt radicalizing the Gramscian intuition in several respects, we think that something of the sort is implicit in Gramsci's distinction between corporative and hegemonic class.⁵⁹

Charara's analysis signaled the difficulty of a hegemonic articulation in a political terrain saturated by communal solidarities that form an integral part of capitalist relations of production and of the modus operandi of the workings of the Lebanese state. *Origins of Sectarianism* signaled the difficulty of the Maronites in the twentieth century both to represent their own interests and to craft a hegemonic pro-Western Lebanese nationalism that is economically integrated into, and politically separated from, its Arab surroundings. The clashes of 1958 and the wars that began in the mid-1970s bear witness to that. More recently, Hizbullah, the militant Shi'i Islamist political party and militia, attempted to articulate a hegemonic vision of Lebanon along the lines of its own agenda of a "Culture of Resistance," in alignment with the Syrian and Iranian regimes, against the Israeli breaches of Lebanese sovereignty and the dictates of US foreign policy. In all of these cases, the condition that Laclau and Mouffe describe, in which a "particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it" to form a "hegemonic universality," failed. The divisions of the Lebanese state along its confessional lines, by enmeshing political practice in the multiple webs of the social fabric, ensured the prevalence of multiple countervailing powers that has till now foreclosed the emergence of dictatorial or authoritarian regimes, such as the ones ruling neighboring Arab countries. The obverse of that coin is that those

same countervailing powers, whether they are represented in the state apparatus or not, have, through their mutual attempts at subjugating each other, produced a constant oscillation between civil wars and “cold civil-communal peace”—and thus have so far preempted the formation of a totality that could be represented by a particular political force.⁶⁰