

Prologue

Je voudrais sans la nommer vous parler d'elle.

—GEORGES MOUSTAKI

At a fundamental level, I am preoccupied in *Revolution and Disenchantment* with the question of theory and practice. More precisely, I explore the seductions, authority, and pragmatics of theory in revolutionary political organizations and academic settings. My modes of investigation are therefore historical and ethnographic, in contrast to a philosophical one that offers, say, an a priori account of how theory ought to relate, or not, to practice. I pursue these questions by tacking back and forth between the long overlooked archive of the 1960s Lebanese New Left and the critical theories produced in the Euro-American academy.¹ In particular I examine the beginnings, high tides, and vicissitudes of Lubnan Ishtiraki (Socialist Lebanon, 1964–70), a small Marxist organization, composed for the most part of militant intellectuals. In this work, I do not reconstruct a comprehensive history of the Lebanese Left, its political fortunes, and the multiple theoretical streams that nourished it, and the ones it produced. Rather, I revisit a minority Marxist tradition, which produced conceptually sophisticated diagnostic works, and a revolutionary movement that splintered. In taking the Marxist tradition as my major site of investigation, the question of theory and practice is thought concomitantly with the dialectic of revolutionary hope and political disenchantment.

I do not revisit the theoretical works and political trajectories of an older generation of militants because I think they provide answers to a present characterized by both a heightened state of communal and nationalist fragmentation and an increased interconnectedness fostered by the accelerated circulation of capital, people, and technologies. Having said that, more than a handful of the questions this generation of militant intellectuals confronted have regained intellectual and political relevance in the wake of the Arab revolutions and the global anticapitalist mobilizations: Who is the revolutionary

subject? What are the different forms a political organization can take, and when does an agency of emancipation turn into one of power that stifles the people's initiatives in their own name? What are the privileged sites of political practice, and its multiple scales? Do militant intellectuals translate *texts* to educate the masses? Or translate themselves to working-class neighborhoods and jobs to learn from the masses (*établissement*)? How does one mobilize across difference?² If power is primarily conceptualized as exploitation, how are other forms of power conceptually apprehended and politically articulated with a class-based politics? More specifically, what is the political status of forms of communal solidarity in a revolutionary project? What forms of class-based national politics are possible when the political is not autonomous from the social—sectarian, regional, and kinship divisions—and when these multiple communal constituencies share the state's sovereignty? These questions about theory and practice that seek to elucidate the subject and agent of revolution, as well as the modalities, scales, forms, and telos of political practice, are confronted by militants in their daily practice. In the Marxist tradition, which holds theoretical analysis in the highest regard, these questions are tethered to the generative labors of translation and interpretation that produce its universality in practice, through the global circulation of texts—think Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Mao Tse-Tung, Che Guevara. In *Revolution and Disenchantment*, I weave the story of revolutionary hope and disenchantment with the answers the Lebanese New Left articulated in practice to three fundamental issues that generations of Marxists worldwide confronted and were divided by: the question of intellectuals, as the vectors (or not) of revolutionary theory; the debate around the organization, as the mediator (or not) between theory and practice; and last but not least the anxiety generated by nonemancipatory—non-class-based solidarities—attachments, such as national and communal ones, as impediments (or not) to revolutionary practice.

The problem-space of beginnings is radically different from the one of completion. Much has happened in the world since I began feeling my way around some of the material that ended up in this book. This project initially took shape in the US in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, characterized by the imperial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the polarization it effected among Arab intellectuals. This period witnessed the increasing public visibility of intellectuals critical of Arab culture and society grouped under the catch-all banner of “Arab liberals,” a substantial number of whom previously belonged to leftist political parties. At the time, it did not seem that there was

any possibility to break free from the political deadlock that presented itself as the impossible choice between “national sovereignty” under tyrants hiding behind a thin veneer of anti-imperialist rhetoric and a potential “democracy” to come brought about by foreign sanctions and occupations epitomized by the invasion of Iraq. In this conjuncture *theoretical* anti-imperialism, as practiced in the US academy, resonated loudly, and affectively, as an ersatz political anti-imperialism. As the tanks rolled in, the least one could do is put on a postcolonial armor to debunk the claims of intellectuals deriding Arab culture for its atavisms or calling for the “liberation” of Muslims, particularly Muslim women, from the yoke of religious fundamentalists as rigged faulty knowledges in cahoots with imperial ideologies.

The project was first articulated as an attempt to understand the shifts in political ideologies from Marxism to liberalism in the Arab world. At the time, the opposition to the Iraq War and the US plans in and for the region in its aftermath came hand in hand with a critical attitude toward universals, such as liberal democracy and human rights, as vectors of imperial violence cloaked in ideologies of liberation. In brief, the polarized present justified the interest in, and the will to critique of, liberalism. The first part of the question—Marxism—however, was a different story altogether. It was nourished by older subterranean political-affective veins, which were carved out in the early 1990s, as I was coming of age, in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil and regional civil wars (1975–90), the cradle of my generation’s political consciousness. The 1960s and 1970s Left, with its militants, thinkers, novelists, playwrights, poets, and musicians, became then a site of deep political-affective investment. For one, that tradition was generative of theoretical-aesthetic-political explorations far more seductive and engrossing than the intellectually tenuous, politically provincial, and aesthetically kitschy productions of the nationalist and sectarian (Christian/Muslim) forces. For those of us escaping the provinces of families, regions, and sectarian communities and meeting in Beirut, for the most part in university halls, a few years after the fighting stopped, the Left was also a name for a project that held the promise of a political community much wider, and more inclusive, than the stifling compounds of, predominantly but not exclusively, sectarian communities. The Left, it is needless to assert, also held the promise of a more socially just world. The conceptual resources of the tradition also enabled the beginnings of a critical apprehension of the post-war economic policies and privatized reconstruction projects in the mid-1990s that were opposed by a number of former leftist militants. Last but not least, the 1960s Left was on the right side of history. It supported, and allied itself, with the Palestinian revolution, against the predominantly Christian Lebanese

nationalist forces, who during the wars (1975–90) were backed by Israel. For all these reasons and more, it seemed like the 1960s generation was the last great revolutionary, and intellectual, generation. The fact that this generation failed to achieve its revolutionary goals did not dampen the melancholic tones of this attachment. Melancholy, though, should not to be confused with assent. The attachment did not preclude an intergenerational, critical at times, dialogue. This was a melancholy for a time that precedes my birth in the first years of the civil wars and my generation's formative experiences. At least then there was a possibility of emancipatory political practice that escapes the times of repetition of inter- and intracommunal fighting. History, at that point in time, could have been made. It was a youth that was traversed, in part, in the future anterior tense, sustained by endless streams of revolutionary song, some texts, and a dearth of political experience.

So when I began the project theoretical anti-imperialism and political anti-imperialism came hand in hand. The first, particularly in the form of the theoretical epistemology critique of the universalist or essentializing discursive assumptions of Arab intellectuals and militants, or both, was in tension with the political-affective attachment to the Left tradition as a project of total emancipation. I did not release the tension in one direction or another. Bit by bit, and after meeting some of these disenchanted Marxists and talking with them at length about their political lives and conceptual works, I grew increasingly skeptical about the suitability of epistemology critique to capture the stakes that animated their projects, and the multiple articulations of theory and practice I was unearthing as I lingered over and reconstructed aspects of this generation's spaces of experience and horizons of expectation.³ In part this was a well-known story of ethnographic humility, which consisted of testing the limits in practice of certified theoretical contraptions to immediately capture an entire world upon landing there. That said, the narrative of ethnographic humility was entangled in a more personal (dare I say postcolonial?) two-step move. The first step consists of confusing the latest metropolitan theoretical moves with the most sophisticated ones that are assumed to have a universal validity. In practice, this reproduction of the colonial divide takes the form of assuming that "abstract theory" is produced in the metropolises and "concrete facts" are found in the Global South. It also takes the form of pinpointing the lack of conceptual sophistication, or the old-fashioned nature, of theorists in the peripheries. To say this is to underscore both that the West was taken to be the land of theoretical opportunities and that a certain idea of what constitutes "theory" was assumed to be the most prized form of thinking. The seductions of academic metropolitan theory are also compounded by a spotty knowledge

of the works of previous generations and a dearth of critical engagement with it in the present (step two). This is too large an issue to be broached here, but suffice it to say that generational transmission, which is in part related to postcolonial state and educational institutions, is a very difficult and fraught question that leaves its marks on works and lives: Where do you begin from and how?

While I grew increasingly skeptical of theoretical anti-imperialism as the primary conceptual lens to approach the archive of modernist and contemporary Arab thought, I was still attached to political anti-imperialism as the prime contradiction that ought to dictate political alignments. Then the Arab revolutions happened (2011–). The event broke the political paralysis resulting from the deadlock of having to choose between authoritarian nationalists and imperial democrats. The long eclipsed subject and agent of emancipation—the people—occupied center stage again. The revolutions were a seismic pan-Arab event. They displaced the West from the heart of modern Arab mass politics in rearticulating popular sovereignty outside the orbit of imperial decolonization. Unlike the twentieth-century mass movements, the revolutions that mobilized millions of citizens against their own regimes were not propelled by anti-imperialist engines. This does not mean that anti-imperialist concerns were completely absent but that they were not the main drive of the revolutions. Earlier mass political movements in the region carried successively the banner of decolonization from political domination (independence movements), political and economic dependence (radical national liberation movements and the Left), and Western cultural alienation (Islamists). The Arab Left thought the questions of external economic independence and internal class contradictions together, but for the most part these twentieth-century movements articulated multiple visions of political, economic, and cultural sovereignty from imperial orbits. The first wave of revolutions (2011–) ushered in a new structure of feeling, which, in my case at least, put to rest the melancholic attachment to the 1960s generation as the marker of the last great leap into emancipation.

Looked at from the perspective of the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, we seem to be entering into “post-postcolonial” times that are beginning the process of decentering the West in practice after it has been subjected to multiple iterations of theoretical decenterings in the past.⁴ This is not only because of the practice of the revolutionaries but also because of the recent geopolitical conjuncture, which dislodged the post–Cold War arrangement during which the West, and particularly the US, was the supreme intervening military power. Arab, regional, and non-Western international powers are increasingly and unabashedly involved in the region. Two caveats. First, unlike its decenter-

ing in theory, which is staged as a liberatory act of decolonization, its decentering in practice certainly did not usher in an era of progressive politics. A quick glance at the Russian, Iranian, Turkish, and Israeli involvements in Syria, in addition to Western ones, and the destruction they brought on are enough to put an end to the automatic association of the decentering of the West with a horizon of justice. Having said that, this is certainly not a cause for imperial nostalgia and to begin lamenting “the decline of Western civilization.” The legacies of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the never-ending “War on Terror” are still unfolding in our political present, not to mention the continuing US support of the Israeli colonization of Palestinian lands. Moreover, the multipolar interventions today are in part the consequences of the recent US interventions in the region. This decentering is a crucial fact to be reckoned with, without celebration or lamentation, and it’s not an easy thing to do since clear-cut binary antagonisms and the logic of the “main contradiction” are hard to dislodge from political alignments.

The limits on anti-imperialism, as the main contradiction, animating both theory and politics is clearly revealed in the growing chasm separating oppositional, diasporic or not, intellectuals in the metropolises and critical thinkers, artists, and revolutionaries at home and those of them who recently found sanctuary in the metropolises. The political alliance between metropolitan oppositional culture and revolutionary forces at home that Edward Said wrote so eloquently about, and that he embodied in his own practice, today seems like a relic from a bygone age.⁵ Critical strategies that rely exclusively on speaking back to the West through marshaling a set of binaries—West/non-West; homogenization/difference; universal/particular; secular/nonsecular; westernized elite/nonwesternized masses; liberal Muslim/nonliberal Muslim—that retain the West at the heart of their deepest attachments have become increasingly problematic in the wake of the Arab revolutions. They cannot account for political practice outside of its relation, and opposition, to imperial orbits, obliterating the revolutionaries’ attempts to make their own history, and reinscribing in the process the West as the main subject and agent of history.⁶ These critical theories also fail to critically account for the multiple societal divisions that result from the entanglement of the political in the webs of the social fabric and for the interventions of non-Western powers. In other words, forms of revolutionary practice, the logics of communal solidarities (sectarian, ethnic, regional, kin), and interventions by non-Western powers whose coordinates cannot be plotted on the axis of the West remain invisible in theory. At most, these critical strategies point out, and rightly so, that communal solidarities are the offspring of modernity—imperialism, capitalism, the nation-state. Non-Western interventions in the region can be condemned

politically and morally, but these critical theories do not have the resources to apprehend them conceptually.

Lest you think that there is an “Arab exceptionalism” lurking in the situation I am describing, I will bring this preface to a close by undertaking a historical and regional translation. More than a decade ago, Rey Chow interrogated the self-referentiality of the knowledge produced by area studies that, by focusing on “targeting or getting the other,” ends up consolidating “the omnipotence and omnipresence of the sovereign ‘self’/‘eye’—the ‘I’—that is the United States.”⁷ Chow, who herself grew up among survivors of Japan’s invasion of China between 1937 and 1945, remembers how, as a child, she was used to hearing more about the wartime atrocities committed by the Japanese against the Chinese than she did about the US violence against Japan. The arrival of the Americans, she recalls, was considered “a moment of ‘liberation’” (Chow, *Age of the World Target*, hereafter *AWT*, 25–26). These childhood oral narratives will persist in her mind as a “kind of emotional dissonance, a sense of something out-of-joint” (*AWT*, 26). “It is as if the sheer magnitude of destruction unleashed by the bombs,” Chow writes, “demolished not only entire populations but also the memories and histories of tragedies that had led up to the apocalyptic moment, the memories and histories of those who had been brutalized, kidnapped, raped, and slaughtered in the same war by other forces” (*AWT*, 26). The erasure and silencing of these multiple, non-US-centric experiences results, she notes by drawing on Harry Harootunian’s work, in the haunting of area studies by the “problem of the vanishing object.” In brief, the events, “whose historicity does not fall into the epistemically closed orbit of the atomic bomber—such as the Chinese reactions to the war from a primarily anti-Japanese point of view,” Chow asserts, “will never receive the attention that is due to them” (*AWT*, 41). Chow’s reminiscences, particularly the out-of-jointness between one’s violent experiences, and emotions, and what metropolitan disciplines and critical theories take as their object of study and critique, resonates deeply with the generation of disenchanted revolutionaries whose story this book recounts. Self-referentiality may render these metropolitan works provincial, but that does not subtract from their authority, which is not necessarily an epistemological effect—say, of their theoretical superiority—but a consequence of their institutional location. Metropolitan scholars, diasporic or not, have the luxury to, and selectively do, ignore works by Arab thinkers and militants at home in a way that the latter cannot afford to do.

You may, at this point, detect a tension in my argument between the case I am making for the necessity of taking stock of the decentering West in practice—by revolutionaries and non-Western interventions—and my reinscription of the

hegemony of its knowledges and educational institutions. I don't think there is a tension here. Again, we are living in times when English is still the strongest global language, in a time when the educational institutions of the West, particularly those of the US, are still hegemonic and opening offshore outlets in different parts of the world; *and yet* the multiple political, economic, and military developments, particularly in the Arab world today, steer us toward not collapsing critique exclusively with opposition to the West. In this conjuncture, what are the analytical, political, and ethical costs of insisting that critical theory equals a critique of the West and its discourses? If "Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world," then how does this "fundamental experience of our era" impact the modalities of operation of critical practices and the political compass that guides metropolitan oppositional alignments?⁸