

2. DREAMS OF A DUAL BIRTH

Socialist Lebanon's Theoretical Imaginary

There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.

—KARL MARX

Théorie: ce mot fit emblème. Non seulement pour une collection sévère d'ouvrages difficiles et exigeants, mais pour une génération. "La Théorie de Marx est toute-puissante parce qu'elle est vraie," répétions-nous avec Lénine.

—CHRISTIAN JAMBET

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, Susan Buck-Morss published a small book of essays, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (2003), in which she thinks through the possibility of a global leftist politics in the present. The book's main argument, Buck-Morss writes,

is that Islamism as a political discourse can be considered together with Critical Theory as critiques of modernity in its western-developed form. It asks readers to suspend existing political identities and reconfigure the parameters of their discourse to recognize overlapping concerns. It does this performatively, analyzing the present through the work of contemporary Islamic rather than western theorists. Its touchstones are not Agamben, Žižek, Derrida, or Habermas, but rather, Taha, Gannouchi, Shariati, and Qutb.¹

The essays call into question the supposed dominance of Western philosophical traditions, whose self-sufficiency is continually reinforced in the present by those thinkers who deem their conceptual resources enough to interpret the world. For instance, Buck-Morss draws attention to the renewed theoretical interest in Pauline Christianity: "By returning to the Western tradition, *yet again* 'putting on the mask of St Paul' (Marx!) in order to speak politically of the rupturing power of the event," she writes in a later piece,

“the pragmatics of his [Alain Badiou’s] action reinforces that tradition and obliterates change, weakening the messianic, political power of the present that he intends to affirm.”²

In engaging Islamist political discourse, Buck-Morss’s challenge is not only a theoretical one, which seeks to move beyond the consecrated canon of critical theory and Western philosophical traditions. It is also a politically courageous and generous intervention by a committed public intellectual who, amid the hostile political climate toward Muslims in the West, embarks on an engagement with Islamist political discourse to rethink “the entire project of politics within the changed conditions of a global public sphere” (*TPT*, 5). It’s a task she undertakes through calling for translation between political languages, disrupting in the process the discourses of watertight distinctions between “us” and “them” predicated upon timeless cultural essences separating a Western civilization from an Islamic one. In doing so, Buck-Morss goes against the doxas associating Islamism with “dogmatic fundamentalism and terrorist violence that dominate in the Western press” (*TPT*, 49). She puts the accent on the multiplicity of positions taken in, and the vibrant character of, debates animating Islamist spaces of argument while also proposing that Islamism, like critical theory, “inaugurated an autonomous tradition of immanent critique in the Middle East” (*TPT*, 98). Without seeking to defend all positions or movements under the Islamist banner she underscores that Islamism “enables political discourses that are modern in their own terms, rather than as a failed mimicry of the West” (*TPT*, 51–52). Buck-Morss envisages her project as a challenge “to rediscover one’s own commitments in a foreign political language, and to ask not only what is lost in translation but also what might be gained” (*TPT*, ix).

Buck-Morss’s project of translation and rescue of the critical kernels of thinkers such as the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) and the Iranian Ali Shariati (1933–77) contrasts the new global Left, which she hopes will come about, with an older Marxist one. The picture she paints of Marxist thinkers and militants who were contemporaries of Qutb and Shariati is executed with broad brushstrokes. “A comparison informs us as to how the discourse of the new global Left will be different from the Marxist international one,” Buck-Morss writes, “where translation occurred, but heavily in one direction” (*TPT*, 7). “Any Leftist,” she continues, “who lived in or visited the ‘undeveloped’ world at that time will be aware of the degree to which the Marxist Left understood itself as an avant-garde in elite terms, rather than popular and democratic. Despite their radically critical stance Marxists embraced a vision of modernization that had

in common with capitalism and imperialism a conception of the third world as inexorably backward and behind" (*TPT*, 7).

In "Can There Be a Global Left?," the book's final essay, Buck-Morss reiterates her critique of the Arab Marxist tradition as caught in the webs of modernization theory. "When Western critical discourse was adopted by Arabs in the Marxist mode, this absence of a double critique," Buck-Morss writes, "tended to be just as prevalent, as Arab Marxists were similarly adamant that their own societal and religious forms were vestiges of the feudal past" (*TPT*, 97–98). Why does Buck-Morss's admirable enterprise of translating Qutb and Shariati to Western audiences in the wake of the "War on Terror" has to be coupled by a schematic ahistorical critique of Arab Marxist thinkers and militants? Does her sketch of Sayyid Qutb as the immanent critic of Egyptian society necessitate painting his Arab Marxist contemporaries as adamant modernizers ensnared by Western concepts? Doesn't her sketch of Arab Marxists risk paralleling, and giving conceptual fodder to, nativist arguments attacking them for being vectors of a foreign, imported thought—failed mimics of the West?

I will now revisit the history of Socialist Lebanon (SL) with a focus on its labors of, and thoughts on, translation, as well as the uses and authority of its discourses. In doing so, I will touch on how the labors of theory as a mediator of political practice sheds light on the disciplinary uses of theoretical texts. Moreover, unearthing the long-neglected histories of the Arab Left—both as a discursive tradition and organized political practice—through reconstructing the international travels of militants, the global traffic in concepts, and the alliances of political parties, to pick just a few examples, brings to light a complex transnational story whose horizons transcend the frontiers of nation-states and the boundaries of religious traditions. It is also an argument against the easy dismissal of an entire tradition, which in the wake of postcolonial epistemology critique and the Islamic revival came to be characterized as plagued by crude modernizing Western assumptions or accused of foreignness. In recovering this history, my aim is not only to complicate Buck-Morss's sketch of Arab Marxism but more importantly to bypass looking at Arab thinkers as falling into one of two camps: either failed imitators of the West (call them self-Orientalizing if you want) or autochthonous—religious in this particular case—thinkers engaging in an immanent critique of their societies. I will return to Buck-Morss's work at the end of the chapter to think further with her about what she calls historical pragmatics, that is, "the practical implications of theory expressed within specific historical configurations" (*STF*, 72).

*Traveling Student Militants: Beirut, Lyon,
Manchester*

Fuad Chehab launched his presidential mandate in 1958 by meeting Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of the United Arab Republic, on the Lebanese-Syrian border. The election of Chehab, the previous commander of the Lebanese Army (1946–58), to the presidency in the wake of the local, regional, and international 1958 crisis put a halt to the previous president's pro-Western and anti-Nasser policies. Chehab adopted a policy of neutrality in Arab affairs and collaboration with Nasser, and he worked in his first years on establishing a politics of national reconciliation. In a speech on November 21, 1960, the eve of Independence Day, Chehab laid out his modernization and welfare program: "He called for 'comprehensive social reform' and the 'building of a new society.' The message was clear: 'those who benefited from prosperity should take care of the deprived Lebanese . . . some should sacrifice and the others should be patient.'" ³ Chehabism came to denote policies of modernization and welfare. The president surrounded himself with a young generation of technocrats and "relied on new institutions: the Bureau of Planning, Bureau of Statistics, Office of Social Development, Water Services of Beirut, and even a Center for Scientific Research, which formed a sort of shadow ministry, all devoted to the president." ⁴ His statist and egalitarian social agenda, refracted through the Lebanese sectarian prism, would benefit the peripheral regions, as well as seek to redress Christian overrepresentation in state institutions. ⁵ It constituted a "partial response to the demands of sharing and participation by the insurgents of 1958." ⁶ The reverse of the developmentalist statist coin was the infiltration of state security agencies into the capillaries and major arteries of Lebanese political life. Chehab's project, Fawwaz Traboulsi writes, "sought to provide the country with an alternative political body by co-opting the armed protagonists of the events of 1958, using the army, the intelligence and the technocrats." ⁷ The president's mandate ended in 1964, but his personal clout persisted, and Chehabism "spread, continued and eventually ran out of steam under his disciple and successor as president, Charles Helou (1964–1970)." ⁸ It was in this post-1958 Chehabist national conjuncture that Socialist Lebanon was founded (1964). The two dynamos of the group, Waddah Charara and Fawwaz Traboulsi, already had some years of reading and political experience behind them as well as bouts of study in the West, the first in Lyon and the second in Manchester.

Charara's last two years of high school (1958–59) were reading intensive. His French had become solid enough to plow through theoretical texts and he

had the chance to be taught by gifted teachers. Among those who taught him philosophy, discussed with him, and lent him his books was Hassan Ibrahim—Muhsin Ibrahim's brother—who had just come back from France. Ibrahim had studied with figures such as Jean Piaget, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Daniel Lagache, while working on a dissertation under the supervision of Vladémir Jankélévitch. Around this time, Charara read works by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ferdinand Alquié, Henri Lefebvre, Merleau-Ponty, and Arthur Koestler's *Le Zéro et l'Infini* (*Darkness at Noon*). The readings were put to use by the seventeen-year-old in political discussions. He left the Ba'th in 1959, in his last year of high school, having spent a year and some months in the party, after engaging in intellectual discussions during which "my weapons were Sartre, Merleau-Ponty . . . and Lefebvre."⁹ These "weapons" were wielded in numerous internal discussions about party structure, the relationship of the party to its base, taking state power, and the forms of socialism. These discussions were taking place against the backdrop of the formation of the United Arab Republic in February 1958, and the July 14, 1958, revolution in Iraq that ousted the Hashemite monarchy, bringing to power the Arab nationalist "free officers" six years after the Egyptian Free Officers assumed power in Cairo. On a scholarship in Lyon (1959), Charara collaborated with the Réseau Francis Jeanson and began reading Marx and Engels.¹⁰ Charara ended up working with the Left's student syndicate and joining a workers' cell in the French Communist Party, while studying for a degree in philosophy and a diploma in *la psycho-pédagogie de l'enfance arriérée*—"psycho-pedagogy of retarded children"—on the basis of which he was granted a scholarship; a topic he had no particular interest in pursuing.

Unlike Charara, who quit the Ba'th before his travels, Traboulsi, who was very close to the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) in his school years, joined the Ba'th in 1958 while studying in Manchester. He had refused to officially join the ANM, whose right-wing agenda in the late 1950s centered on the primacy of Arab unity without making room for the social question.¹¹ "The Arab nation," in the ANM's ideological perspective, "had first to achieve a certain measure of political integration and freedom from Zionism and imperialism before it could turn its full attention to the process of building a democratic and socialist Arab society."¹² The ANM's stagism—union first, then socialism—was criticized by the Ba'th for its betrayal of the Arab masses in the interest of the bourgeoisie. It also did not convince the young man who, "obsessed with dialectics" at the time, engaged in long discussions with ANM cadres, such as King Hussein of Jordan's cousin, who later became prime minister of his country. "Of the questions I asked the latter [the king's cousin]:

Did the Algerian Revolution take place only for freedom, or for both freedom and bread? And he used to insist that bread was not related to Revolution, while I held on to my views about bread and freedom.”¹³ Traboulsi joined a Marxist wing of the Ba‘th Party in Manchester, attracted by the leftist critiques of the ANM and of Nasser that centered on the necessity of tying socialism to the question of Arab unity.¹⁴ Heading there to complete his GCEs (General Certificate of Education) and study painting at night, Traboulsi was welcomed with a workers’ demonstration, marching under the slogan “Bosses like tea, so do we!” that demanded a fifteen-minute daily tea break.¹⁵ The young bourgeois man moving from the courtyards of his father’s cosmopolitan hotel was shocked by Manchester’s industrial misery: “Sugar was still rationed since wartime, and only varieties of brown sugar were available. Most houses lacked indoor restrooms. While workers on morning buses would smoke half a cigarette, keeping the second half for the ride back home.”¹⁶ Traboulsi soon dropped his artistic aspirations, studying a little, reading a lot, and militating even more: “I read a lot about plastic arts and economics, as well as socialist writings, from British Fabians to Marxists of all nationalities. In addition to whatever fell under my hands pertaining to the Arab world’s politics, history and sociology. I was also especially captivated by the school of British realists in cinema and theater, bustling as it was with the anger and rebellion of the post-Suez war generation.”¹⁷ In addition to his Ba‘thist duties and solidarity activities with the Algerian Revolution, Traboulsi inaugurated what would become a lifelong relation with, and attachment to, Yemen. He founded, alongside an Iraqi comrade, the kernel of what would become the Union of Yemeni Workers in the United Kingdom. “In the cold, humid houses, inside of which the sons of ‘Happy Yemen’ were packed by the dozen, I listened to many stories narrating the double tragedy of its sons’ migrations: they flee the imamate’s oppression through Aden to fall prey to industrial exploitation and English gangs’ racist provocations.”¹⁸ Back in Beirut, after managing to stretch his A levels for two and a half years in England, Traboulsi enrolled as a student of political science at the American University of Beirut. He had his membership in the Ba‘th frozen because he maintained contact with a group of Lebanese Ba‘th cadres, which included Mahmoud Soueid, his future Socialist Lebanon comrade, who had left the party after Syria’s secession from the United Arab Republic (1961).

Examining the travels, interests, and practices of Charara and Traboulsi reveals how the intellectual and political activities they took part in transgressed national, class, linguistic, ethnic, generational, and disciplinary boundaries: joining the French Communist Party; working with Yemeni immigrants in

Manchester; studying painting, philosophy, and psychology; engaging in student syndicate militancy; collaborating with the Réseau Jeanson; meeting Syrian, Iraqi, and Egyptian militants, party officials, and intellectuals. In engaging in these practices, these young militant intellectuals traversed a variety of social, political, and intellectual worlds that they were not necessarily groomed to inhabit. These travels and displacements helped fashion a political subjectivity that defied the logic of expertise and professionalization, one that was imbued with an internationalist sensibility and intently focused on its present (Arab unity, the Algerian anticolonial struggle, Yemeni immigrant workers, student syndicates). Modernization, backwardness, religion—the themes that will form the conceptual backbone of a retrospective epistemological critique of Arab Marxists—were not part of the constellations of questions that animated their pursuits. They were driven by political questions to which they sought answers in their numerous engagements, ideological conversions, and theoretical elaborations.

Early on, the readings of these future intellectuals were extensive and not circumscribed by disciplinary boundaries. These transdisciplinary readings—psychology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, aesthetics, economics—were mobilized to both understand their present and to intervene politically either in internal party debates or on its fringes. Theory, particularly Marxist theory, in the late 1950s was the new “weapon” of choice they deployed against their own very recent past and against their Arab nationalist comrades. In a couple of years, by 1961, the theoretical weapon was no longer wielded individually and internally (the Ba’th’s Marxist wing). Marxist theory occupied center stage of Arab nationalist debates in the wake of the first pan-Arab significant setback, nearly a decade after the Free Officers reached power in Egypt.

A Fateful Disunion

1961 constituted a critical year for the Arab unionist project. On September 28, 1961, a coup d’état in Syria dissolved the union with Egypt, which had been promulgated in 1958. The three-year union was a difficult time for the Ba’th. President Nasser insisted on “having parties in Syria agree to dissolve themselves as a condition for the unification of Egypt with Syria. The only organization Nasser would allow was the ‘National Union,’ to be copied from the Egyptian experience.”¹⁹ Nasser’s high-handedness in controlling the National Union, and growing opposition inside the Ba’th Party to its agreement to dissolve itself, led to criticism of the United Arab Republic, which “intensified following

the dismissal of party representatives and supporters from their government positions.”²⁰ Prominent leaders of the Ba’th signed the manifesto in support of the dissolution of the union between Syria and Egypt in 1961. These were tense times for the Ba’th. Mahmoud Soueid was one of the Lebanese cadres who left in the wake of 1961.²¹ “We left,” says Soueid, “because the party in Damascus applauded the secession and we were unionists. How can an Arab nationalist party support the secession? There was a lot of shouting, screaming, and clashes. It was very harsh. We kept on meeting for some time while claiming that we are the party but they had everything, including the press, in their hands. Bit by bit, we dissolved and nothing remained.”²²

Military coups brought the Ba’th to power on February 8, 1963, in Iraq and a month later, March 8, 1963, in Syria. By that time Traboulsi’s membership in the party had been renewed and he had established links with the emerging leftist trend, whose main ideologue at the time was the distinguished Syrian Marxist thinker Yasin al-Hafiz (1930–78), editor in chief of *al-Ba’th* newspaper. This trend adopted Marxist theoretical tools to call into question Aflaq’s version of Arab socialism. Its manifesto, *Some Theoretical Principles*, was adopted in the party’s Sixth Conference (1963). It denounced “the party’s previous belief in the utility of private property and condemned it as a petty bourgeois socialism.”²³ Arab socialism, according to the Sixth Conference’s proceedings,

was a negative and incomplete response to the challenge of local Communism. It warned that such an attempt might lead to a nationalist chauvinism, which rejects the universal intellectual heritage of socialist thought. Arab Socialism, the conference added, has remained, on the whole, partial and without any scientific content. Assessing the impact of the party’s distorted image of socialism, the conference pointed to the dominance in the party organization of bourgeois elements and the prevalence of a petty bourgeois mentality in party ranks.²⁴

Fawwaz Traboulsi was appointed to a committee to formulate the proceedings of the Sixth Conference, headed by the party founder, Michel Aflaq (1910–89), who “refused to sit on the same committee as the AUB student, who was supported by his leftist opponents in the Syrian and Iraqi regional leaderships.”²⁵ Traboulsi was expelled from the party on the eve of the Seventh Conference (1964) after writing a “Letter to the Comrades” protesting the party’s relinquishing of the socialist option, and severely criticizing the Ba’thist coup in Iraq, especially the persecution of communists and the war against the Kurds.”²⁶

Socialist Lebanon was founded in 1964 by seven intellectuals in the folds of the Chehabist modernization experiment, which provided a time of internal stability, and out of a leftist opposition to it. The mid-1960s for members of Socialist Lebanon were times of intellectual ferment, of intense reading, discussions, and translations and writings. In the decade before the Lebanese civil war (1975), and prior to the radicalization of the ANM, which decried the post-colonial regimes as petty bourgeois after the 1967 defeat, and the beginnings of Palestinian armed struggle from the country's southern borders, Socialist Lebanon was an intellectual hub, which had no visibility on the national political radar. In its first years, the small group of militant engaged in intraleftist skirmishes whose favorite target was the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). These skirmishes took place on the pages of the bulletin they began putting out in the fall of 1966 under their own name, Lubnan Ishtiraki (Socialist Lebanon). The bulletin was produced underground, without obtaining a license from the Lebanese state, and was reproduced using a Roneo machine.²⁷ The portable Roneo machine the group bought could be closed "like a suitcase" and was mostly kept in Traboulsi's apartment. Keeping the Roneo in a safe place and away from the Lebanese authorities was essential since the bulletins and tracts produced by the machine were the main "public face" of the emerging underground organization.²⁸ The bulletin was not produced in large numbers. At first probably a few dozens were produced and, according to Traboulsi, "later on a few hundred copies in its heydays and it was delivered by hand by members or partisans who made sure the 'contact' was 'secure' before they revealed themselves to him/her and started handing them the *nashra* [bulletin] which played the role of pretext for lengthy discussions supposed to prepare their joining a 'circle' of partisans."²⁹ The mimeographed bulletin was the medium through which Socialist Lebanon circulated its analyses and theories, as well as the main tool used in the recruitment of partisans.

Before I examine what those texts were about, and how they sought to interpellate their readers, in this chapter and the next, I will now look into the processes through which their militant intellectual habitus—reading, writing, translating—was fashioned. Fawwaz Traboulsi recalls the group's joy when Ahmad Beydoun and the late Hassan Kobeissi joined in the fall of 1966, a year and half after the beginning of the project:

FT: Work had started on Socialist Lebanon. The first newcomers were Wadadah's colleagues Ahmad [Beydoun] and Hassan [Kobeissi]. . . . They were a great catch, "une grande revelation," and they were friends. . . . There was

a “frenzy” of reading, and some competition. There was one that read more than the others. Waddah’s distinction, which one has to acknowledge, resides in an exceptional, discipline that we had nothing to do with. . . . Reading *Le Monde* was a duty and taking notes from it.

FB: That’s only him, or all of you?

FT: The whole atmosphere became like this. I was a bit of a deviant because of my Anglo-Saxon side, which is a bit more empirical.

FB: So they all used to buy *Le Monde*?

FT: Yes, yes, and there is always a book, always Maspero’s publications, which were read in different degrees by different people.³⁰

In conjunction with the reading of dailies, periodicals, *gauchiste* publications, and Third Worldist texts, Socialist Lebanon emphasized the reading of the primary texts of the Marxist tradition. “We did not really discuss a lot of secondary readings,” Traboulsi recalls; “there was an idea: *how* should the mother texts—*ummahat*—of Marxism be read?”³¹ The emphasis on establishing a direct affiliation with the main sources of the tradition, a *retour aux sources* of sorts, was a theoretical and political move to be understood in the context of the practices of Soviet-dependent communist parties, such as the Arab CPs including the Lebanese Communist Party and their “theoretical poverty” in the eyes of SL’s intellectual militants. During our first meeting, Ahmad Beydoun fleshed out, in his poised manner and slow articulate speech, one aspect of the idea of the *retour aux sources* while providing a synopsis of the relationship of SL’s relation to the Marxist corpus, emphasizing the cohabitation of different trends in the organization:

AB: In reality, Socialist Lebanon had many things. First there was a great sense of theoretical self-importance and a theoretical contempt of communists [LCP]. When I look at it now, I realize it was not built on such a solid base, we were not so advanced . . . but we used to consider ourselves light-years away from the LCP theoretically. So there was this thing, this sense of self-importance, with a lot of eclecticism. We did not force ourselves to choose, and this lasted for a while with an accent, an emphasis on a particular movement—each year or two maybe or every six months. I can’t now delimit these periods for the five to six years spent in this experience.

We had a general Leninist heading, but we didn’t say that we were a political party. We had read *What Is to Be Done?* well and discussed it, but we had certain issues, or problems, that were implicit with democratic centralism. We did not acknowledge its problems. Our way out was through saying

that we are an organization and not a party and therefore it's not a problem if we did not apply all the criteria of democratic centralism in the Leninist formulation.

There was another heading, that we didn't name as such then, but you could call a *Marxisme Marxien*, a fundamental Marxism that used to be nourished through a direct relationship with the texts of Marx, and not fourth-degree people.

FB: [Such as] Soviet scientists?

AB: Not [Andrei] Zhdanov, or [Joseph] Stalin, or anyone of that sort. A direct affiliation to *Capital* and the *Manifesto*, this is the second point. We didn't hate Trotsky, we had a real sympathy towards him, especially because of his problems with Stalin, and of course a total enmity towards Stalin. From there onwards, there is something Cuban, Castro, Che, etc., something Maoist and something Italian . . .

FB: Was there a division of labor, say, between the "theoretician" and the "politician"?

AB: No, things didn't work this way. There was one [Waddah] who worked more than the others, and had an older relationship to this line of work than the others, because he had a tight relationship to the UNEF and the French Communist Party.³² He was a Ba'thist beforehand too. . . . Fawwaz we used to consider the Leninist of the group, the class analysis guy, and the one with organizational conceptions. That's how things were.

The gist of what I want to tell you is that we did not feel the urgency, or the need of settling [on a trend]. We didn't even know how much we were with the Italians or the Cubans and how much we were against them; these were not clearly determined, and for Maoism it's the same. In reality, what we used to call theoretical superiority was a diversity of sources with a knowledge, as I was telling you, of these sources that is relative and with the selection determined by our subjects, the Lebanese and Arab ones.³³

Socialist Lebanon was a loose space in both the organizational sense of not adhering to the strictures of democratic centralism and in the ideological sense of allowing multiple intellectual influences inside the group without declaring a full allegiance to any of the directions. This is how Beydoun put it during our second meeting, when I brought up again the issue of SL's intellectual interlocutors and ideological horizons:

AB: No one said I am Trotskyist, for example, or I am Maoist, or I am Guevarist.

FB: But how did Guevara, Castoriadis, and Lenin blend together?

AB: This is the issue. There was a presumption that we concentrate on our situation. Where are we? Where can we work? And at the same time understand what is happening beyond us, particularly in the Arab world with an emphasis on movements of political change, or insurrectionist movements; and, of course, with a concentration on what would necessarily make you gravitate towards it, because it constituted an event, such as the defeat of 1967. However, at the end of the day, how each one used to read the things he was working on was partially left to his own discretion. There was no real control of these things. . . . For example, Marx, OK Marx; Lenin, OK Lenin, but also Trotsky, Althusser, Foucault's early work, even [Jacques] Lacan. . . .

FB: I was told that you used [Pierre] Bourdieu in writings against the [foreign language] failing grade?

AB: Even Bourdieu, of course . . . *Les Héritiers*, for example. This book I discovered as soon as I arrived in France in 1963, it was published in 1964. . . . It shook me tremendously, and I felt as if something lit up.³⁴

In "The Coming Battle of Secondary School Students," published in the fifth issue (April 1967), the anonymous SL writer argues that Lebanese schools are necessary institutions for the reproduction of social inequality in the country. The student protests, SL wrote, are the result of the internal rural-urban migration, and the clash between the new generation of students from destitute backgrounds, on the one hand, and the curriculum, which was put in place for different kinds of students, on the other. Eliminating students as a result of their low grades in foreign language examinations, continued the editorialist, was the *sieve* of the ruling classes "to bar the barbarian invasions of the sons of the petite bourgeoisie, some of the workers and the peasant classes," limiting them from reaching the echelons of the administration.³⁵

The plethora of theoretical texts that SL members were reading found its way into their analysis of the situation, but were not all cited in the bulletin. Browsing through the issues, one will not stumble on citations of Fanon, Lacan, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Althusser, but on authors from the revolutionary tradition solely: mostly Lenin, as evidenced in the texts chosen and glossed over in the "theoretical education corner" of the bulletin, some Cuban references, and more Mao in the last years of the bulletin (1969–70) after the inauguration of Palestinian resistance operations from southern Lebanon (Fig. 2.1). Bourdieu was not mentioned in the text, nor was the essay signed. Our present academic culture would put the underground revolutionary organization on a plagiarism trial, since its members subscribed to a collectivist ethos. Bourdieu's critical sociology of the French educational establishment was translated into

لبنان الاشتراكي

نيسان ١٩٦٧

العدد الخامس

الافتتاحية

في وجه المناورات الدائفة

ليكن شعارنا: البرجوازي اخو البرجوازي، مما كان دينه!
والسامي (العامل والفلاح والموظف الحر) ١٠٠٠ اخو
السامي، مما كان دينه!

طوال الشهر الماضي، كانت "الواد المتغيرة" في
السياسة اللبنانية عبارة عن سلسلة متصلة لم تنته بعد، من
المناورات الدائفة بين تلخيصا بما يلي:
(١) خدال البطريرك المصوني في ٢٠ آذار المنصرم،
بعد "المناسخ المخترعة" معلنا ان لبنان (لبنانه هو) امة توحد
بالله وتبذل الاشتراكية والشيوعية داعيا الذين لا يشاءون هذا

الايان الى سلوك "دريق البحر المفتوح امامهم".
وسريان ما تجاوب مع البطريرك الثلاثي الرعوي (اده و نمصون و جميل) فكانت مذكرة رئيس الكتائب
احتجاجيا على "تدخل سفير" في الشؤون الداخلية اللبنانية، والعمل على انشاء جبهة برلمانية
معارضة من الكتليين والكتائب والوثنين الاحرار.
(٢) تزايد نشاط "حزب البنية الوطنية" الداعي الى ما يلي:

— تعديل الدستور.
— عدالة التوزيع، نظرا لانه "لا يجوز ان تكون المراكز الرئيسية في الادارات العامة والمصالح
المستقلة من نصيب فئة دون غيرها".

— الاحتجاج على "عدم التكاثر" في الحكم بين سائر الفئات اللبنانية* (اي سائر الفئات الدائفة) و
وادعوه الى منح رئيس الوزراء سلطاته كاملة "فلا تتجاوز به الاجدرة عليه...".

(٣) النتيجة التي اثرت، وما زالت تثار، حول انتخاب الشيخ حسن خالد كفتي للجدسورية وصول زيارته
للقاهرة وتصريحاته العديدة هناك ونا. وكل ذلك في محاولة لاجل "بركة" للمسلمين، والتحدث الرئيسي
باسمهم. ولعل خير دليل على هذه المحاولة البيان الذي اعدوه "لما الاحياء" البيروتية، يسلمون فيها لواء
زيارتهم التقليدية لثواب بيروت بمناسبة عيد الانبياء وتسليم كل قباياهم للفتي مباشرة.

(٤) التهديد لمودة موسى الصدر من جولته بين المهاجرين اللبنانيين في افريقيا وبالمناسبة فان
المسول الرئيسي لهذه الجولة هو اسرة كامل مروة والشر. ضيفا و فضلا عن الدعوة للحلف الاسلامي - طالب
الاحقاد الدائفة حول مقتل كامل مروة على اعتباره عمل دائفي (سني يشتمل شيعة) - والمتوقع ان يعاون
موسى الصدر حملاته المبالغة لتحويل كل مشكلات الجنوب (التي هي مشكلات تخلف واستغلال) الى مشكلات
دائفة حول "حقوق الشيعة" (في التوزيع خاصة) واعانة مجلس ملي شيوعي مستقل.
ان كل هذه المناورات على تنوعها وتعارضها ساهبا، تلتقي عند قاسم مشترك بيدا. وتوانها محاولات

FIGURE 2.1. *Socialist Lebanon*, Issue 5, April 1967.

Arabic three years after its publication, and put to work by militants to provide an analysis of how the Lebanese bourgeoisie uses foreign language grades to perpetuate its rule and to underscore the importance of supporting the student movement. Theory in practice in 1967 Beirut was put to use, unlike how we use it today in our academic worlds, without any reference to its creators.³⁶

This double erasure of authorship was related to legal, political, and theoretical issues. Some of the members were public school teachers at the time, which made it legally difficult to write under their own names while calling for a revolution against the state, their employer. It also served them well politically because the veteran, and much larger, Lebanese Communist Party—founded in 1924—and the other parties they were subjecting to a ruthless critique on the pages of their bulletin could not assess the size of the new organization. The erasure of Bourdieu and company's names, on the other hand, was an integral part of the means of production of revolutionary authority. Charara mentioned during one of our conversations that his militant voice was partially a consequence of not wanting to be taken for a *farfelu* (eccentric, wacky) intellectual tinkering with culture, in contrast to a revolutionary grounding political practice in a Marxian theoretical analysis.³⁷ Their collectivist ethos permeated leftist political and artistic practices at the time.³⁸ At the heart of these collective endeavors was an attempt to transform the relations of production and to rearticulate intellectual and political practice away from the bourgeois notion of the individual author, the tortured romantic genius, and the fetish of the name of the master. In addition to reworking relations of production, these collectives strove to circulate their works outside of the market, by bringing them to the people in noncommercial venues such as factories, public spaces, and universities in order to circumscribe turning them into a commodity with an exchange value that would eventually overcome its use value. While Socialist Lebanon initially included prices on their underground bulletins, the organization ended up distributing it for free.

Winds from the South and Back

In *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, Kristin Ross notes that in the years directly before May 1968, those coinciding with events such as the bombing of Hanoi by the Americans in December 1966, “it was the North Vietnamese peasant, and not the auto-worker at Billancourt, who had become for many French militants, the figure of the working class. . . . [he] provided the transitional figure, the relay between the ‘intimate’ colonial other, the Algerian of the early 1960s, and the French worker during ‘68.”³⁹ Ross then proceeds to investigate “the sites

and discourses that allowed the geography of a vast international and distant struggle—the ‘North/South axis’—to become transposed onto the lived geography, the daily itineraries of students and intellectuals in Paris in the early 1960s” (*May ’68*, 82). François Maspero’s bookstore La Joie de Lire in Paris and his publishing house were two such important relay sites. Maspero’s bookstore, which opened its doors in 1956 and closed down in 1975, “coincides almost exactly with the rough twenty-year span—from Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the Bandung conference in the following year to some time [*sic*] in 1975—the period during which the periphery became the center of interest to European, and particularly French, intellectuals” (*May ’68*, 82). Maspero’s publishing house began its activity in 1959 and stopped in 1982.⁴⁰ During the high tide of anticolonial struggle, François Maspero’s publishing house was known, in Ross’s words, as

a “wind from the South”: The press that tracked the ruin and collapse of Empire, that regularly gave voice to South American, African, and Asian political theorists and testimonies, the press that first published Fanon’s *Les damnés de la terre*, with its preface by Sartre, as well as works by Ben Barka, Giap, Cabral, Che Guevara, Malcolm X and others. . . . It was largely because of the Editions Maspero, and because of the editorial direction followed by *Le Monde Diplomatique* and *Les Temps Modernes* during those years—these three publications shared many of the same authors—that one of the great *gauchiste* particularities of the time became palpably evident: theory itself was being generated not from Europe but from the third world. Not only was the figure of action, the militant peasant and freedom-fighter, a third world phenomenon—this, after all, was to be expected according to a standard international division of labor in which Europe and the West are the thinkers and the rest of the world doers, the men of action. But “the wretched of the earth”—Mao, Guevara, Fanon, Cabral and others—had become in this era of *gauchiste* reversal the thinkers as well. (*May ’68*, 83–84)

Éditions Maspero also published continental theory works, notably Althusser’s *Pour Marx* (For Marx) and *Lire Le Capital* (Reading Capital), which he coauthored with his students Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière. Both volumes, which were published in 1965, were read, discussed, and put to use by Socialist Lebanon. These three *gauchiste* publications—books by Maspero, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and *Les Temps Modernes*—were pivotal in the readings discussed in Beirut at that time.⁴¹ Ahmad Beydoun complements the account provided by Traboulsi above, noting, “Fawwaz guided

us to *New Left Review* and *Monthly Review* and until now I still have tens of these issues. . . . We were continuously following *Les Temps Modernes*, sometimes *Esprit* and *Critique. Le Monde Diplomatique* [we used to follow] with full diligence; we used to keep all the old issues.”⁴² The group’s dominant Francophone imaginary, which followed the world’s events through a close reading of *Le Monde* and *Le Monde Diplomatique* and sharpened its theoretical skills and political analysis via devouring Maspero and Le Seuil books and following *Les Temps Modernes*, was also enriched by Anglophone radical publications.

The peculiarity of the trilingual horizon (Arabic, French, and English) of Socialist Lebanon is predicated on the Lebanese educational system, which alongside Arabic teaches a second foreign language, or two, the most common during the 1950s being French, which was adopted as the main foreign language by Lebanese public schools at that time.⁴³ This trilingual imaginary would also prove to be crucial in expanding the range of available works for translation: Fawwaz Traboulsi on the Anglophone side, and Hassan Qobeissi and Waddah Charara on the Francophone, were among the most prolific translators of the group. The Parisian “wind from the South” traveled back to the South, to nourish SL’s intellectual-political project. These Third Worldist metropolitan publishing houses were not only bringing the peripheries into the metropolises but also worked as a bridge, one that made the ideas and experiences of different militants from the South accessible to each other. French and English mediated between these different Third Worldist militants, who most probably would only have access to each other’s writings through the former colonizer’s language.

The Parisian publishing houses—Le Seuil, Maspero, and Minuit—also played an additional role when it came to the particularity of Arab politics. Socialist Lebanon, which emerged out of Arab nationalism’s orbit, read and translated into Arabic the writings of Egyptian Marxist thinkers who put out systematic critiques of Nasser’s regime from its Left. Anouar Abdel Malak (1924–2012), Hassan Riad (the pseudonym of Samir Amin, 1931–2018), and Mahmoud Hussein, the nom de plume of the duo Adel Rif’at (1938–) and Bahgat al-Nadi (1936–), wrote in French, published in Paris, and resorted to pseudonyms to escape retribution from Nasser’s regime in the wake of the crack-down on the Egyptian Communist Party, which began on January 1, 1959.⁴⁴ These insurrectionary works highlighted how the caste of nationalist officers gave rise to a state bourgeoisie that exploits and dominates Egyptians while appropriating the social surplus for its own benefit, failing therefore to fulfill the necessary task of primitive accumulation needed for development. Abdel Malak’s *Egypte, Société Militaire* (1962) was the first book Waddah Charara

translated shortly after it came out, after he had returned from France (1963). It appeared in Arabic without the name of the translator and with a modified title coined by the publisher of the Beirut press Dar al-Tali'a—*Egypt, a New Society Built by the Military*—instead of *Egypt, Military Society*, to dampen the critical bite of Abdel Malek's title. French publishing houses in this particular case were a haven for Egyptian Marxist critics, enabling their work to escape Nasser's censorship and creating a bridge connecting them to their comrades in Beirut. What couldn't be published in Cairo in Arabic was published in France and translated back into Arabic in Beirut with the hope that it would circulate in the Arab world.

Diagnosing the Present, Acting Now

In its May 1969 issue, the journal *Dirasat 'Arabiyya* (Arab Studies), a vibrant forum for discussing contemporary Arab culture and politics published in Beirut, featured a forty-one-page essay titled "Madkhal li-Qira'at al-Bayan al-Shuyu'i" (An Introduction to Reading *The Communist Manifesto*, hereafter IRCM).⁴⁵ Under the author's slot in the journal's table of contents, the editor wrote, "Prepared by 'Socialist Lebanon's' study circle." The "Introduction" counters economically determinist readings, authorizes antievolutionary positions, and develops SL's perspective on the centrality of translation for political practice. "The point of view adopted by the *Manifesto* regarding the succession of political stages," Socialist Lebanon writes, "is of crucial importance":

It rids Marxism of the charge of evolutionism, which dominated Marxist writings for a long time, and is still prevalent in a number of works by communist parties. And perhaps the most significant position premised on evolutionism is the one that calls for the support of the national bourgeoisie because the history of the society in which the communist party is militating hasn't passed through all the required stages: . . . feudalism, capitalism, socialism. . . . And since this society hasn't passed through the capitalist phase, and its bourgeois political leadership, this means that the ambition of any group that belongs to the working class or the petite bourgeoisie to constitute the leadership of the period is illegitimate because its aim is not consistent with the [logic of] succession of stages. (IRCM, 47–48)

In an essay revisiting the history of Arab communist parties after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Iraqi social scientist Faleh A. Jabar writes that the five-stage Stalinist schema—"primitive communism, slavery, capitalism, and

lastly communism, socialism being the first stage (or transitory phase of the latter)" —established the theoretical ground from which questions arose.⁴⁶ "What role could be found for the anti-colonialist nationalists?" communists were asking, and "what road should the 'revolution' follow: a capitalist path, a move toward socialism, or a third way that involved gradual change?"⁴⁷ The ideological battle lines of the 1960s, he continues, focused on whether communists ought to "burn stages" or adopt an "evolutionary" view of history in answering the following kinds of questions: "Was the national bourgeoisie, as a social class, capable of carrying out the required tasks? And, if so, to what extent should it be supported? Or if this class was impotent, should the working class step in as it had done in the October 1917 revolution to undertake both democratic (i.e., capitalist) and socialist tasks at one and the same time?"⁴⁸ It is as a response to this conjuncture that the militant intellectuals of Socialist Lebanon anchored their antievolutionary positions, which called for the autonomy of the working class and its capacity to "burn stages," in a *retour aux sources* to the *Manifesto*. In doing so they short-circuited Stalinist interpretations and undercut the official Soviet doxas of the time to announce that the positions calling for a historicist logic of stages, predicated on an economic reductionism, are not authorized by Marx's text. "If the forces of production, as well as their continuous development, lead to the shattering of the relations of production and to toppling the political regime that maintains them, then the fall of the regime also results in pushing the forces of production forward by removing all obstacles that were hindering their development," Socialist Lebanon observe, warning against a reductionism that does not pay attention to the fact that the "political structure plays an important role in the development of the forces of production" (IRCM, 48).

At the heart of SL's interpretation of the *Manifesto* is an argument against the historicist "not yet" that relinquishes the working class and the revolutionary act to the "waiting room" of history since the objective conditions of the moment are not ripe for its autonomous action.⁴⁹ In their refusal to wait for the revolution, they were insisting on the "now" as "the temporal horizon of political action," which the anticolonial nationalists had also done before them against the "not yet" of the colonizer. The difference was that in the late 1960s, more than a decade and a half after the Free Officers came to power in Egypt, and more than five years after the Ba'ath Party established its rule in Syria, Socialist Lebanon's "now" was a postcolonial one par excellence. They refused to subordinate revolutionary politics to an alliance with, and support of, the national bourgeoisie, "traditional leaders" such as Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community, who founded the

Lebanese Socialist Party, and to Arab nationalist regimes that also brandished the flag of socialism. In fact, the Lebanese organization made sure to draw their readers' attention to the "inaccuracy" of some of the widely circulated slogans of these actors. Socialism, they assert, is not "the society of sufficiency and justice. If dignified living and sufficiency and justice are some of the consequences of a socialist society, it is first and foremost the collective control of the producers over the means of production" (IRCM, 74–75). The unnamed author of this particular definition of socialism they are countering is no other than President Abdel Nasser.⁵⁰ This generation of militant intellectuals, who came of political age as Nasser's anticolonial star was rising in the 1950s and experienced the secession between Syria and Egypt in 1961 as a bitter personal blow, became by the late 1960s Marxist critics of the anticolonial nationalist regimes in power, the national bourgeoisie, and last but not least the pro-Soviet communist parties.

Socialist Lebanon's emphasis on the present moment also came across through inscribing their struggle in a globally shared contemporary horizon of the people's struggles from China to Cuba and by calling for a thorough diagnosis of the present's particularity. "What is the characteristic of our present era?" is a question that every communist has to ask, Socialist Lebanon assert, as they supply the direction of their answer: "[Starting] from here, a point which Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao have recurrently come back to is clarified, and that is that the answer to this question cannot be general, and cannot be repeated, even if the circumstances preserved their general outline. Every Marxist work has to come back to this question with regards to its country and its circumstances, and to do so again with every transformation in its conditions and those of the rest of the world" (IRCM, 43). Communist politics in Socialist Lebanon's interpretation is given its coherence, overall general direction, and particular shape by an analysis that is attentive to the particularities of its present. The absence of this capacity for analysis, whose aims are simultaneously to rise above the particularities of disparate problems—say, in the syndicalist militancy of the student, worker, and peasant sectors—and unify them in a general political project that is grounded in the specificity of the situation, results in the disintegration of revolutionary practice. "The practice that pulls together all the isolated issues, and highlights the condition of their political realization," they affirm, "is theoretical practice or political analysis (we are momentarily using the two expressions interchangeably)" (IRCM, 71). If the analysis of the particular characteristics of the present are forgone, the party will be transformed into "splintered sectors, each working on its own without any relation to the others but attending central committee meetings and discussing

the general 'line' that does not generalize anything but a bunch of slogans that should work in Bolivia and Sudan as well as in Lebanon, which means that they are not valid in any country" (IRCM, 71).

Transfiguration, Translation, Pragmatics

The emphasis on the diagnosis of the particularity of the present forecloses for Socialist Lebanon the possibility of a general and repeatable answer that cuts across times and spaces. In doing so, the Lebanese militant group was clearly arguing against viewing Marxism as a direct translation of a body of theory to disparate particular situations that are themselves not generative of theoretical elaborations, but passive recipients of a "revealed" universal discourse. Tackling head-on the question of translation in the Marxist tradition, Socialist Lebanon's critical posture is not one that emphasizes the unmasking of a particular parading in the guise of a universal, say, some of Marx's nineteenth-century Eurocentric formulations, even though they are not oblivious to them. As a matter of fact, they begin their "Introduction" with a reflexive move that stresses the spatiotemporal axis of difference separating their context of reading and interpretation from the time and place of the *Manifesto's* writing:

What is taken for granted is that *The Communist Manifesto* did not treat the problems we are suffering from nor did it "predict," as it is said, the enormity of the problems that colonized countries (those colonized by the West) would face. Rather those countries are only mentioned in the *Manifesto* in rare places, and with a name, which is not considerate at all: "The barbarian countries"! And it was not written on the eve of a national liberation revolution, but a month before the outbreak of the 1848 revolution in France, i.e., on the eve of the first workers' revolution that destroyed the bourgeois monarchy and laid the foundations for the Second Republic . . . Moreover, the *Manifesto* was written in the mid-nineteenth century, i.e., in a period when European industry had not yet witnessed the biggest share of transformations, which would change the face of Europe and the globe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Besides, the workers' movement had not yet traversed the great number of experiences that it would endure during the next fifty years. (IRCM, 38)

In this opening paragraph, placed under the heading of "Why Do We Read *The Communist Manifesto*?" Socialist Lebanon firmly asserts the difference separating the contours of their present from the *Manifesto's* time and place of writ-

ing, deny any supposedly predictive quality to the Marx-Engels text, while ironically referencing and translating Marx's "barbarian countries" into the colonized ones. While they were certainly far from epistemologically naïve, subscribing to every letter of Marx's text, Socialist Lebanon's critical posture did not circumscribe itself to debunking the politics of theory. They did not throw the baby out with what they perceived as the Eurocentric bathwater because Marxist thought for them was more than a body of knowledge to be scrutinized for Eurocentric and Orientalist assumptions. For one it was a powerful analytical tool that helped them understand their colonial modernity and the class contradictions internal to their societies against other political forces such as Arab nationalists who were dealing with the meanderings of *The Arab Spirit*, and its resurrection—Ba'th means "Resurrection" in Arabic. More importantly, Marxism held a key to understand these societies, on the one hand, and a tool to effect their revolutionary transformation toward the horizon of social justice, on the other. It was a theory of political practice; Socialist Lebanon was fond of quoting Lenin's maxim, "Without revolutionary theory, there is no revolutionary practice." This is why the gist of their intervention does not lie in unmasking the particular hiding behind the universal, but in arguing that by not taking into consideration the spatiotemporal characteristics of Bolivia, Sudan, and Lebanon—the particular—one traffics in hollow universals that have no traction and are too general to be of any use.

Failure to translate is to transform Marx's oeuvre to a *lettre morte*. There is no way then of being a proper communist without engaging in a translation of Marx and Engels's works, one that does not constitute an inauthentic copy of the original, a particular distortion of the universal text, or a failed mimicry of the West. On the contrary, translations are generative and constitutive not only of Lebanese Marxism but of the communist tradition of thought and practice. "Innovative socialist revolutions," write Socialist Lebanon, "have been tied to novel theoretical thought: the Bolshevik revolution and Lenin, the Chinese revolution and Mao Tse-Tung, the Vietnamese revolution and Vo Nguyen Giap, the Cuban Revolution and Che Guevara" (IRCM, 71). In SL's interpretation, Marx's oeuvre constitutes the foundational text of the tradition, which *authorizes* socialist political practice and thought. It does not, however, stand as the untroubled transhistorical universal to the particular glosses that come in its wake. Rather, Marxism cannot be separated from the circulation and translations across time and space of Marxist works, including the numerous returns to Marx's oeuvre itself. The universality of Marxism is constituted through, and is a product of, the multiple acts of translations and does not precede them. Just think for a moment of Socialist Lebanon in late 1960s

Beirut going back to Marx after having just read Giap, Fanon, and Althusser, who himself was rereading Marx in the wake of such figures as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Lenin, Gaston Bachelard, Mao, and Gramsci to get a sense of the distance we have traveled away from a view of Arab Marxists as ensnared by modernization theory and engaging in unidirectional acts of translation of Marxism characterized as a Western critical discourse.

At the heart of Socialist Lebanon's acts of translation lies the question of political practice, of providing new knowledges that authorize forms of revolutionary politics and participate in the formation of novel political consciousness and subjectivities. The "Introduction" was written for and used in theoretical education circles after the newly founded Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP, 1969) approached Socialist Lebanon with a request for such a text. Marx, Lenin, Mao, Trotsky, Guevara, and others were read in French or English and translated into Arabic from these translations under the temporal pressure of political practice, sometimes comparing the translations in two different languages, or different translations in one of these languages while working on the Arabic text.⁵¹ Their labors of translation from translations driven by the impediment of practice, whether working with Mao or Marx, bypassed the distinctions between original and copy, universal and particular. The question of linguistic difference, of fidelity to the original language, mattered less than the capacity of accessing, interpreting, and putting to practical use authoritative discourses about the analysis of class, imperialism, and guerrilla warfare.

These acts of translations and transfigurations, which were fueled by the impediment of revolutionary practice, were not mediations between a self and an other. Theirs was not an attempt that sought, as many anthropological works do, to render what seems unfamiliar at first glance familiar, or, going in the opposite direction, to denaturalize what we take for granted. Susan Buck-Morss's reading of Qutb and Shariati, which works toward a rediscovery of one's own commitments in a different theoretical language as well as revealing the contingency of Western norms when refracted through the prism of Muslim thinkers, is in line with this approach. That is because their world of the late 1960s and 1970s was neatly divided into the two camps of Left and Right, progressives and reactionaries, national liberation movements and colonialism. This was a time when young, militant intellectuals in Lebanon would debate national liberation movements in Latin America, as well as the minutiae of strikes and syndicates in some European factory, when the students of the American University of Beirut would demonstrate in protest against the war in Vietnam. This world, wrapped in one overarching *canvas* on which clear fault lines

were drawn between Left and Right, has vanished. Theirs was a world that was eclipsed by the rise of the questions of community, by which I mean the resurgence of infranational sectarian, regional, ethnic, and familial solidarities, and the emergence of an array of militant political forces grouped under the banner of political Islam. Some of them, like Charara, were among the first to take note of the entanglement of political practice in the cobwebs of communal solidarities that relegated the march of the working classes toward brighter tomorrows into futures past (Fig. 2.2).

In the opening pages of *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (2003), Susan Buck-Morss revisits her own trajectory as she pithily identifies the ebbing away of that old political world:

In the 1970s when I was a student, Marxism in its multiple variants—Western Marxism, Marxist humanism, Trotskyism, Leninism, Maoism, Fanonism—provided the common discursive terrain in which critics of exploitation and domination could agree (often vehemently, even violently) to disagree. The secular Left throughout the Middle East was a vibrant part of that conversation. . . . Part of the postcolonial reality since the end of the Cold War has been the disintegration of the discursive unity provided by Marxism, for which some of us must confess feeling not a small bit of nostalgia. (*TPT*, 7)

Buck-Morss's translations take place in the wake of the disintegration of this common ground. Her project of translation takes place on a different plane than the one Socialist Lebanon undertook, whose unified world linked Hanoi to Cuba by way of Paris. Her translations are not actions that are undertaken under the urgent pressure of political practice, which seeks a revolutionary theory to ground and guide it. Translating Qutb and Shariati into English in New York produces very different kinds of analytical and political effects than translating Marx and Giap into Arabic in Beirut. I would like to think more with Buck-Morss about her crucial insight that "our forms of critique are actions that themselves affect history," which is central to her more recent essay, in which she returns to Qutb and Shariati (*STF*, 67). Buck-Morss writes:

If we do *not* rescue the progressive moments in present-day religious writers—Qutb, Shariati, and so many others—whose political actions we have neglected even to see, but who belong objectively to *our* time and who are, in the uncomfortable sense our *contemporaries*, if we continue to ignore their highly influential work, abandoning them on the field of political imagination, then we allow their legacy to be taken

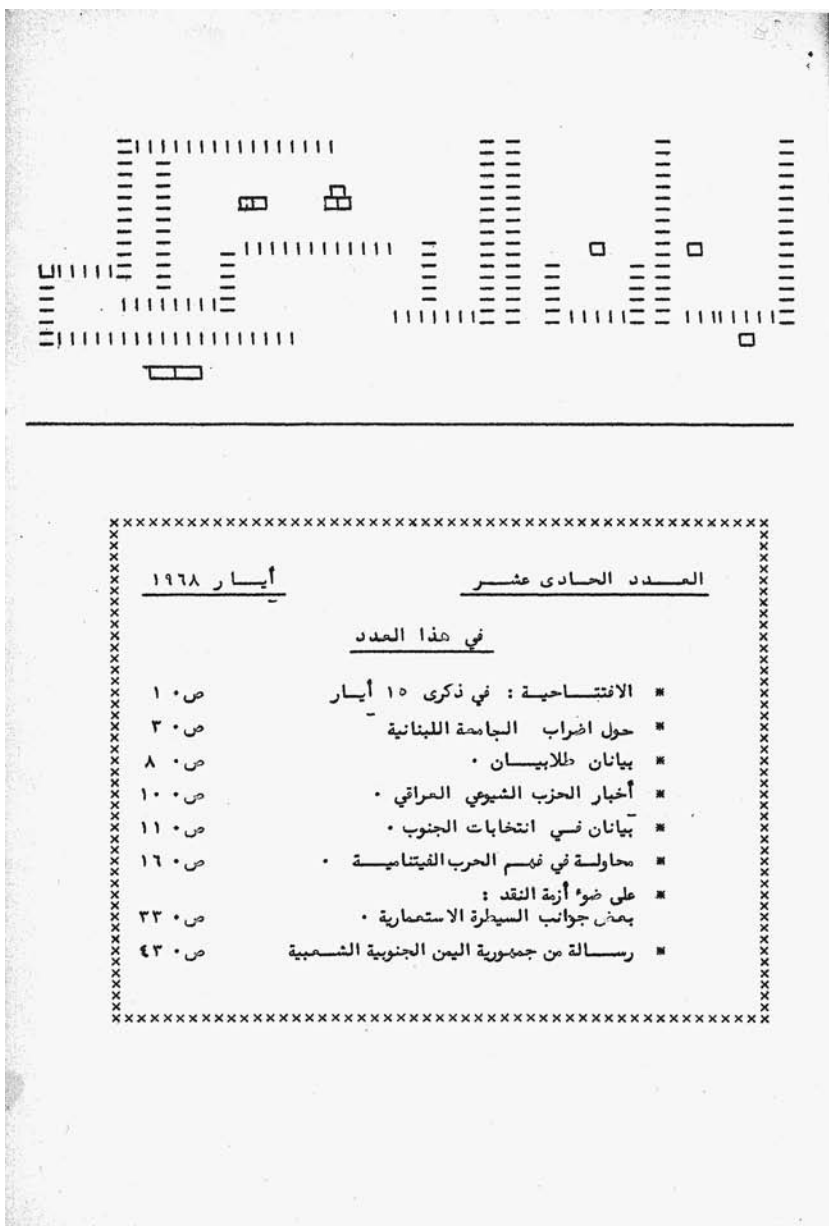


FIGURE 2.2. *Socialist Lebanon*, Issue 11, May 1968.

over by those all too eager to appropriate it for their own hegemonic projects. A relevant anecdote: Nathan Coombs writes, ‘When *Culture Wars* approached me to review a release from Verso’s Radical Thinkers series, I responded “great give me Ali Shariati.” But Shariati was not in the collection. (STF, 79)

Buck-Morss’s call for engaging these intellectuals qua political theorists, and not merely as native, local intellectuals whose lives and works are framed through concepts and methods developed by the “theorists” of the Euro-American pantheon, is a necessary one. Her juxtaposition of the theoretical labors of Qutb and Shariati with those of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin on the same page, in a montage of fragments from different intellectual traditions, produces salutary effects. Buck-Morss’s textual montages jolt some readers out of complacent intellectual habits; despite the different theorists from the South that the Marxist tradition produced, some readers still expect “abstract,” “universal” theory to be produced up North and “concrete,” “particular” thinking to take place in what is now called the Global South. What concerns me is rather how Buck-Morss envisages the pragmatic effects of her rescue of those progressive moments in the corpus of religious thinkers. How would reading Shariati today by an American critical theorist, such as Buck-Morss, or his incorporation into Verso’s Radical Thinkers series alongside Louis Althusser and Gillian Rose, help disarm those other readers who would like to appropriate his work for hegemonic, or other, ends? Shariati’s oeuvre has been read, commented on, argued with, and mobilized in Iran and the Arab world for more than four decades now. Moreover, forms of critique, and their transnational travels, may produce multiple theoretical and political effects depending on the questions asked by those reading publics and the stakes animating their communities of argument. In saying “our rescue saves Shariati from appropriation by Iranian reactionaries as a tool of the ruling class,” Buck-Morss is simultaneously attributing too much power to one reading of the work, which is isolated from the space of arguments in which this work has been discussed for a few decades now, and holding on to a too limited view regarding the potential pragmatic effects of traveling theories (STF, 80).

Coda: Here and Elsewhere

To raise the question, for example, of whether having a refrigerator, for American society, necessarily implies the destruction of another country and, after that, one’s own destruction. “We start with Vietnam,” he says,

“in order to get to things that would be almost entirely French . . . to show, in the end, that it is clearly capitalism itself which is at stake.”

These are the comments of a filmmaker from a discussion between a collective of filmmakers and the audience composed of workers at Rhodiaceta—a chemical factory—after the screening of *Loin du Vietnam* (Far from Vietnam) (1967). The director in question is Alain Resnais, the talented director who produced landmarks such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* (1961). The collective Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles (SLON) included some of French cinema's well-known directors, such as Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Claude Lelouch, Joris Ivens, and William Klein, in addition to Resnais and Chris Marker (*May '68*, 88–89). Kristin Ross notes that Vietnam and the Third World generally were viewed mostly in terms of class relations in France: “Global solutions to the problems of the third world could only be found in the radical transformation of the Capitalist world system and its replacement by a new economic order” (*May '68*, 89). “The third-worldist perspective Maspero had helped make available to French readers,” she writes, “became the means, in his view, for reconceptualizing the French national situation” (*May '68*, 85). Maspero's views, like the comments uttered by Resnais of the film collective, take as their starting point that “‘everything is linked’ and that one cannot analyze Gaullism, capitalism, or syndicalism in the France of 1966 as though it were a phenomenon isolated from the rest of the world” (*May '68*, 86).

The idea that “everything is linked” undid the East/West distinction and nationalist imaginaries by providing one language to articulate the struggle of workers in French factories and Vietnamese fighters against American imperialism. In France, Maoism provided the “theoretical justification” for the merging of anticapitalist and anti-imperialist themes that Vietnam allowed by “loosening [the French Communist Party's] emphasis on the French proletariat by acknowledging the possibility of other political agents—peasants or farmers” and by emphasizing “the Third Worldist geopolitical organization of the World along a North/South axis—the one etched by the international division of labor” (80).

In Beirut, the “Chinification of Marxism” and the reading of Fanon as Waddah Charara recalled were spurring him and the group to think through a theoretical and political project that would “adapt” Marxism to Lebanese specificity: the Arabization of Marxism was on the table. Charara was asked if the intention behind the “Introduction to Reading *The Communist Manifesto*,” which he had written, was to produce a Lebanese Communist Manifesto. “There was a dream that a number of people, including myself, had,” he answered:

And it was a dream of a dual birth. The birth of a contemporary history from the womb of a local subjective history: Arabic Islamic [history] whose meaning was very different from the one it took later on and that this same history be born and at the same time from a general, common, universal human womb. . . . These two simultaneous births, and most likely we did not give ourselves the necessary tools to understand them, remained closer to a metaphor than to a concept. And even the metaphor remained foggy.⁵²

Maoism and Vietnam enabled French students, intellectuals, and workers to realize that they were in the same fight against a common enemy and that they could not delink their domestic problems from the rest of the globe. Maoism and Vietnam in Beirut, especially after the June 1967 defeat of the Arab armies and regimes, provided a spur for the translation of Marxism to other southern contexts and for a popular guerrilla struggle against colonialism (Israel) and imperialist interests.

Looking at it retrospectively, the frenzy that captivated the members of Socialist Lebanon during their early revolutionary years of selfless immersion in reading, discussing, writing, and translating would prove pivotal for the fashioning of their intellectual habitus. The work ethic and discipline required to plow through dense theoretical texts and to follow the minutiae of global political developments from Prague, to Algeria, and Vietnam, as well as the labors of tying theoretical analysis to practical political situations, will help not only in the formation of a political subjectivity and a cultural capital but also a fostering of intellectual dispositions, which will remain long after the revolution's passing. Moreover, their intense focus on their political present, on reading whatever was useful in understanding it and revolutionizing it, widened their intellectual horizons toward transdisciplinary readings that escaped the logic of specialization and disciplinary boundaries.

The political defeat of a generation of revolutionaries produced a distinguished generation of intellectuals. The underground militants of the 1960s later became the distinguished professors, public commentators, and writers of the 1980s onward. The exit from organized political practice retained from the past the generalist's approach to reading and writing, dodging the logic of specialization. Ahmad Beydoun wrote poetry, a film script, and essays on linguistics and the sociology of culture in addition to his historiographical works. Waddah Charara wrote on themes ranging from popular culture, to cinema, Arab heritage, and Islamic studies, to translating French poetry, on top of his sociological and historical works. Abbas Beydoun became a distinguished

poet, a novelist, and cultural critic. I asked the latter if it was clear to him that he would become a poet during the days of militancy:

It was not clear to me what I would become. I was writing poetry. I wrote a collection, a lot. I started very early, but it wasn't clear to me what I was going to write. So at the same time, I would write poetry, stories, even theater, and it was all dependent on what I was reading at the time. . . .

There were these varied options for someone who fundamentally needed a very long time before acknowledging that one has something that is *private*, before we even talk about specialization.⁵³

After they quit organized political activity and found or developed their own individual interests, their period of militancy will be mostly recast as one of selfless political immersion, and the exit from it will be into a discovery or recovery of private passions.

But why today should we revisit SL's founding moment in the mid-1960s? Is it to argue for the saliency of their answers for our present? It is needless to point out that the national, regional, and global conjuncture they were working in half a century ago is not ours today. Their heated debates about whether the working class ought to "burn stages" or ally itself with the national bourgeoisie reach our shores as faint echoes from a lost world. So much has changed since then. So why return to Socialist Lebanon? Is it to denaturalize a present, permeated by communal discourses and attachments by excavating a past when politics was imagined and practiced differently? Sure, but my historical reconstruction is not fueled by a Left melancholy to a time when class-based politics had a thicker ontological density and when the lines were clearly drawn between the forces of progress and those of reaction.⁵⁴ I am trying to carve a path between a corrosive Left melancholy that disparages an uncertain present, on the one hand, and banishing this past's relevance to our present by dismissing this Marxist generation's critical labors and practice on the basis of their vanguardism or modernizing politics, on the other hand. What I am also after is a rescue of Socialist Lebanon's *ethos*, which shone through their indefatigable tracking of their global present, dodging the logics of professionalization and expertise, what Jacques Rancière calls the logic of the police. By following the minutiae of the secondary school student strikes in Lebanon while reading Bourdieu, analyzing at length the reasons for the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, translating Fidel Castro's speeches on the defeatist line of the Venezuelan Communist Party, and publishing communiqués from a revolutionary Iraqi workers' organization, Socialist Lebanon's political imaginary was not locked on the tired East/West or South/North path. This ethos also shone through

their sustained attention to the specificity of the conditions they were diagnosing and working in. For all their attention to the global unfolding of events, they were not frequent-flying international experts, or parachuted humanitarians on a mission, but committed translators and militants enmeshed in the fabric of their own societies, and accountable to them, whose theoretical acumen was part and parcel of their political project. The path Socialist Lebanon cleared half a decade ago is no longer recognizable to us today. Their dream of a dual birth, on the other hand, has certainly lost nothing of its luster.