Lebanon: The Necessary Re-Appropriation of History and Conflict

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Abstract

This article underlines the need to call for a re-appropriation of history and the conflict dimension in Lebanon as the basis for a new departure. This re-appropriation is twofold: one goes back to the founding values, and one beyond the reassertion of such values, questioning the National Pact and Constitution and seeking to reconsider nationhood from the perspective of a new living-together that is meant to found a new history for the country and be the substratum for the emerging of new historical "events": such living together is to take on a local and thus specific secular formula. The latter must be accompanied by a "productive conflict" acquiring a constant dialectic dimension. This in turn can be seen on various levels, including the religious and socio-economic. Finally, the deconstruction and reconstruction thus effected may only endure if they are accompanied by new shared conceptual complexes that take their departure from reconsiderations of language and textuality pertaining to complexes such as earth-land-homeland-space and the spiritual, all necessitating communicative rationality, in Habermas's sense.

This article is driven by the implications of the interplay between re-appropriation, history and conflict, in so far as the consideration and reconfiguration of this interplay has become a necessity. What I mean by the latter term here has to be taken in the very strong sense of urgency, imminent danger or threat, as well as a pressing need, as in the German term *Not*. This *Not*, with its menacing character, is answered with a re-appropriation, a taking back as one's own, which I will clarify as to its precise meaning and movement first, before I determine its specific operations as involving history and conflict. I am hereby calling for a specific kind of reconsideration of the history of Lebanon that takes into account, while not ignoring other factors, the conflictual character it has always displayed. Such conflict is to be realised anew but in a different configuration, rendering it what I term "productive conflict," accompanied and dynamically concomitant with the creation of new conceptual complexes. The purpose of the latter, in and through their constantly renewed relation to productive conflict, is to allow for the advancement of Lebanese society and the Lebanese individual in his/her multifarious connections and dealings with the Other within and without (Salame,

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1988). As I shall seek to prove, these historically bound and forming concepts arise, and may only emerge, once history is taken seriously as well as questioned, which makes the project outlined in this article an unavoidable foundation for future progress and peace.

In order to fully realise the import of the re-appropriation of history and conflict and thus determine their significance in a way that will answer our purpose of conceptual formations leading to constant intellectual and social progress within relative peace, it is important to understand what I mean here by *re-appropriation*. What this term denotes is a kind of palimpsest that represents the whole process described in this article, one which must be clearly delimited before I proceed. I must first note that it amounts, in its *praxis*, to a making or finding something that is already one's own. It is a recuperative work, a restoring of what has been lost or forgotten – or lost through having been forgotten. We in Lebanon have a *devoir de mémoire*, a memory-duty, toward our past that is at the same time essential for our determination as a people. It is not just a kind of reminiscence of everything past, but of what as *Gewesenheit*, a "having-been," is still here and determines us, while it remains as yet unquestioned, despite all the consequences that have followed from its inconspicuous – I am almost tempted to say "unconscious" – effects, which consequences continue to follow.

The "re-" in re-appropriation is to be understood not only in the simple sense of taking back what was once our own, but as a movement to and fro, seeking to go to the foundational moment(s) of the country and its people and coming back, renewed by that experience, to further allow the "having-been" that we are to blossom and lead us back again into opened and ever-further-opening paths. This constant movement requires the search by very keen eyes for the few elements that have been effectively operating for centuries as invisible centres of self-perpetuating and self-effacing powers. Such elements are often only half-apparent or show themselves in deceiving guise. For instance, one must wonder what lies at the heart of the refusal of civil marriage, beyond mere general moral values, by asking

who is benefiting from such refusal, and then how such people are benefiting, and then why they are benefiting. The same applies to bank secrecy, trade, specific family structures, religious management and many other issues which are epiphenomena of deeper power centres and power struggles. This movement will also lead to our dealing with what lies in certain so-called *foundational events*, to evince thereof the determining factors as perennial and identity-giving. Such work is thus archaeological, ontological and ethical; it is to do with history as it determines us, *is* us, seeks to make who we *are* manifest to us, dynamically finds and reconfigures our relations and our common *telos*. The re-appropriation emerges then as a kind of "revolution," a term which I must also explain precisely.

The revolution meant here has a double determination that forms its unitary movement. It may be first understood, for our purposes, with reference, without any excessively conservative connotations, to Edmund Burke's understanding of it. Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Burke, 1790/1987), criticises the French Revolution for its introducing – something unheard of in history – a break, a rupture that does away with everything and refuses the historical dimension by instituting itself as a beginning *ex nihilo*, failing to take over the past in its founding values and obnubilating its effects. To the French Revolution he opposes the English "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, which was able to bring back the monarchy through a re-appropriation of original values, thus giving the royal house renewed legitimacy. I do not wish to engage in an extensive analysis of Burke's text, even less to call for some form of autocratic rule. What I wish to retain from his critique is first his insistence on the deficiencies of the French Revolution, in its "passion" for the universal, leading it to an excessively universal view of "man" and to disengagement from the particular, the changing, that is, history itself; secondly, and more importantly, the definition of the concept of revolution that comes out of this reassessment: revolution is not to be a complete break or destruction of a whole system in favour of something entirely new, but the

act of revolving, turning over and over, going back to the beginning to rediscover what has always lain there as foundational, then recuperating it in a new fashion.

However, this "recuperation" is not a mere reassertion of old values in Burke's sense. What I am calling for here is neither a total refusal and annulment of what is past, what was and is at the beginning, nor a going back to mere traditions to reanimate them and re-impose them on the population. Hence the second aspect of what I mean by revolution, and which holds a kinship with Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition (Gadamer, 2004), is also, in its very going back to its origin, a critique of that very origin that allows for a rediscovery and especially a revitalising of the original issue in question. What this means is a serious work that will open the origin and unveil the multi-faceted foundation of Lebanon, so as to identify the unconsidered problems therein, especially as they surreptitiously continue to function as a reactionary rebuttal of peace and progress. The operation is not simple, as it involves even what may seem like "positive" elements which are yet fraught with ongoing problems – both undetected and affecting nationhood, selfhood and internal and external relations. Such problems must be revisited, not as mere issues to "solve," but as *loci* of power and control and as dynamic *foci* that must be evinced in their transformative interaction and reconfigured within a protean network, in such a way as to allow for and become themselves a new ever-active grounding work on all levels.

To illustrate, I will take one example, where we may witness such uncovering of the problems inherent in a foundation that is otherwise presented and seen as positive and fostering peace and prosperity. This is done in order to integrate such problems into a fruitful overarching issue – what the French call a *problematique*. The example in question is that of the ever-praised National Pact and its buttressing by such a person as Michel Chiha. The Pact, when looked at objectively, reflects a mostly Sunni-Maronite dominance of politics, which reassures urban Sunnis and guarantees a supposed constant political eminence to mountain

Maronites (Hourani, 1988), prompting Pierre Jemayyel, the Phalange leader, to assert that it "is an eternal covenant," constituting Lebanon's essence; losing it, he argues, means losing Lebanon itself, something Charles Malek and others have sought to assert in similar vein (Barakat, 1988, p. 362). From it arises the Mosaic vision of a quasi-static structure (Farsoun, 1988-9).

What lies at the centre of that Pact? Apparently very positive things, some explicit and some implicit. The reader is able to see them through the lens of tolerance, believing he/she has access to all the Pact's meanings, its constitution and its effects. What Chiha says either justifies and underlies the National Pact or is the direct and indirect result of its adoption. Recognising the presence of problems within the paradoxical situation of the Lebanese people, he calls for avoiding excesses: "Instead of awakening jealousies and passions, we must appease them" (Chiha, 1937/1964, p. 18). We know that such passions are frequently associated with the presence of various religious confessions/sects, which should come together as a nation, for "everything the confessional idea gains, *is what the Nation loses*" (Chiha, 1937/1964, p. 20). This may be achieved through a constant effort to find a middle-way, a "*moyenne*" (Chiha, 1937/1964, pp. 72, 93), an average, in other words, a kind of conciliatory middle position – a compromise.[2] He even goes on, along the same semantic line, to praise the "average" Lebanese himself as the "armature" of the country (Chiha, 1937/1964, p. 73). On the other hand, having warned against the dangers of confessional divisions, Chiha also insists on a specific identity of Lebanon as "a country of associated confessional minorities," which *we should not seek to modify*, since it is, "in the current state of affairs, natural and legitimate," "a structural phenomenon," which "no violence can change" (Chiha, 1937/1964, pp. 54, 115). To this association of minorities, which is to be characterised by tolerance (Chiha, 1937/1964, pp. 87, 97), belongs an openness that must be espoused and expressed through, for example, our speaking several languages (Chiha,

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[2] We may think of course of the well-known distribution of powers along confessional lines.

1937/1964, p. 82). Such openness takes on the form of the famous definition Chiha gives: we are, or Lebanon is, "a link between East and West" (Chiha, 1937/1964, p. 124). Finally, such a link is not determined – unlike Switzerland – through our belonging to a territory but through our personality and legislation (Chiha, 1937/1964, pp. 134-5). In other words, there is an obnubilation of the dimension of belonging to a historical homeland, replaced by a vague concept of "personality" that no one can truly define and a legislation which, whatever form it may take, is at best the result and/or creation of a nation and not the opposite. Personality and legislation are not the essence of any nation, but one of its many expressions, none of which provide a stable definition of the said "link."

On the surface of things, these assertions seem to give, for the most part, a positive conception of who we are, especially coming as they do from the writer of the Constitution and an emblematic figure of what it means to be Lebanese. However, our going back to them will have to take into account all the evolution they, the country and the people, have undergone, all that was not said in them, and all the problems they may hide in their very exuberance. The first problem to come to mind is the demographic changes the country has undergone, both unavoidable and ongoing, thus making the Pact anything but "eternal," its very foundation being susceptible to change. This is just one issue. More generally, we maintain that the origin is not something solely in the past; it is still here with all its half-hidden and sometimes insurmountable problems, and what was ignored or glossed over in the past is for the most part subjected to the same treatment today – more radically, indeed, on occasions. We of course need to question this attitude, this "silencing" of unpalatable truths, to identify the causes and powers lying behind it. Such requires an archaeological approach to history, in the style of Foucault, for example. But we should also go back to the words used and what they tell us, though more importantly what they leave unsaid or hide. Finally, and to address more deeply the central problem, we must emphasize that the origin is a

differentiation, in the Derridian sense. The moment we think we have grasped it, it falls back or forward, taking us into another past or another future as its locus, especially in a Lebanon where the different sects, social groups and movements, find their nostalgia in a mixture of both real and invented moments (Haugbolle, 2010). The perceived origin is never the true origin, however much mythology we ascribe to it. All I am here saying about the National Pact may, I would point out, be applied to many other such claimed origins.

Let us now go back to Chiha and look first at the definition he and others with him have given: Lebanon is "a link between East and West." This is supposed to give a lasting image of Lebanon as open to modernity, to Eastern religions, traditions, and to Western thought, philosophy and so on. However, the word "link," صلة, slips by unnoticed and thus remains unquestioned. It seems natural and as such in no need of special attention. And yet it functions as a "silencing" sign; when it is said, something else has to keep quiet, and that something is precisely Lebanon. The reader may be surprised at this, for after all the word seems to be a definition of Lebanon – it refers to it, speaks about it. And yet, if we think again, we will see that it is no definition, but a mere dissolution of the very thing it purports to define. To say of Lebanon that it is a "link," whatever that link may be, is to refuse to define it. It reduces Lebanon to a relative, insubstantial entity, to no entity at all. A link is not a thing, it has no mass, no independent existence beyond what it links together, it is in itself nothing. Hence, whatever two poles Chiha chooses, whatever phantasms they may evoke, they place the essential, which is Lebanon, beyond reach, beyond definition, while at the same time distracting attention from this very fact. Lebanon remains undefined. With this in mind, we may understand Chiha's insistence on the "average," the medium way, the compromise, tolerance, and so on. The "average" man is the object of praise for accepting the communal divisions as a reality and a necessity; compromises are encouraged instead of ways of posing again the question of "who we are" and making this the central issue.

Another word may also be examined here: *tolerance*. Again, the tolerance Chiha calls for appears as wonderfully peaceable and open to freedom and religion, along with all those beguiling connotations shoved down people's throats on a daily basis by the media, politicians, and our very culture. Yet a further and more serious delving into its semantic content will reveal it as essentially a negative concept, denoting the non-interference of any one community into the beliefs, traditions, *mores* and political stance of the other. This precludes all engagement in the dialectic that can render exchanges dynamic; instead, it demands acceptance of the status quo as the guarantee of national identity, with the famous "link" denoting no more than the practice of free trade and openness to capital and banking.

Much more could and must be said and done with regard to the founding values we will be returning to, but what I have so far brought to light will suffice for the moment, my purpose being to clarify what I mean by "re-appropriation." More thorough and comprehensive reassessment, or rather re-appropriation, should lead to a more productive attitude to history, along with the realisation that a newer basis for nationhood needs to be established. Engaging in such a process will produce – nay, has already produced – a number of alternatives. I am not here concerned with delineating them or placing them in all possible dialectical contexts. What is important is to note that our re-*appropriation* involves or calls for a *reconsideration*. The latter means that we must lay new foundations, replacing those that underlie the confessional system and the empty notion of "link." It also means realising that what is to be appropriated is not just a single origin but a multiplicity of origins, not limited to the French mandate, the creation of Greater Lebanon, and suchlike, but to a heritage stretching back to earlier times, earlier decisions, earlier movements, with families and sects having their origin in the tribes of the past, such as the Ghassanids, Lakhmids, and others (Salibi, 1988).

For a different understanding of nationhood and people, we may first look to Nassif Nassar's repeated calls for and work on secularism as giving grounds for a new departure. Just how long can prejudice last? For so long we have suffered from, and are yet to be rid of, the idea that secularism, or علمانية, entails the abandonment of religion and the religious experience. We will not go into endless debate on this issue. What I wish to emphasise – and here I echo Nassif Nassar (1994) and other theorists in the now century-old tradition of Farah Antoun (Antoun, 1903/2012) – are two things. First, secularism is not opposed to religion as a personal or communal spiritual experience. Secondly, secularism, in our situation, will give religion its freedom while protecting it from partisan politics, specifically the politics of the confessional system. This is true, and it invalidates Kamal El-Haje's well-known defence of confessionalism in the sixties (El-Hage, 1961), not least because his optimism has been proven wrong. Confessionalism, I would say with Nassar, has led and continues to lead to less religion (Nassar, 1994, p. 23), while secularism widens the horizon, opening society to a modernism, which, as Daniel Sibony puts it, "has abolished nothing – neither the holy, nor sin, nor its transfer; it has simply widened the field of the metaphor's application" (Sibony, 1992, p. 203). Whatever intellectual misunderstandings have occurred in the past with regard to secularism and the fear of its adverse effect on religion, what we need for our purpose is to maintain its validity as a first step that gets to the heart of our nation's origin, opening it as a locus for new questioning and new productive thinking. Indeed, while secularism is never subservient to religion, it never says "no" to religion, seeking its destruction. It does not reject tradition; nor is it an unchanging and non-negotiable concept – it is not dogma. Secularism opens and reopens a space for all forms of constructive debate, communicative action and reason, which, in its very disunity,[3] will help establish many places for ethical, moral, social and political decisions.

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[3] I am thinking of course of Habermas' theory of communicative action. Habermas (1984).

Secularism is not meant to be the overall and final solution, although it has emerged here as an essential. It must be accompanied by what I may term a "productive conflict," which will first absorb non-productive, "false" and sterile conflicts while developing its own *modus operandi* and conceptually-binding dynamics. We may consider the development of this "productive conflict" on two important levels, at least as far as Lebanon is concerned, the religious and the socio-economic – although this does not exhaust the possible levels of development.

On the religious level, it means going beyond religious differences. Difference, as we have known since Plato and Aristotle, does allow for a definition (Aristotle, 1941, p. 160), for naming, but allows little beyond that. I do not, of course, claim that we should erase or ignore differences, as some states have tried to do in the past in the name of a view of equality that is no more than the identity of a totalitarian *ipse*. What I mean here is a kind of *Aufhebung*, a raising, a sublating, a taking-up of the religious diversity question, bringing it into dynamic, dialectic, permeable and protean dimensions, each of which has its own specific role in keeping the question open and productive. Religions, through this process, will be exactly what they are not at present. They will constantly transform their very essence – unlike today, when they are kept as an unchanging, underlying substance for all religious "accidents" – lying not in a timeless, eternal being, but in a continual becoming. They will open for each other new theological paths, allowing ontological questions and hermeneutics to be reconsidered. This transformative to-and-fro movement is only possible if in interacting they accept the "danger" of responsible questioning. The term "danger" is not used here simply to surprise; the concept is at the heart of the work I am calling for, since "danger" is the *sine qua non* possibility – or perhaps we should say corollary – of all honest thinking. This can best be understood through a reference to Heidegger, who states that faith, when it is valid,

exposes itself to the possibility – the "danger" – of non-faith[4] (Heidegger, 1983, p. 6). In other words, and for our specific purpose, each religion will have to expose its own foundations, be they textual or historical, to other religions, whether like or unlike it in character, whether affirming or negating what it stands for. Sometimes exposure of this kind will indeed lead to negation by the other, yet this very "negative" can be productive, fostering progress and leading to new horizons of truth and understanding. In this shared intellectual and social process, religions will be the agent of their own positive development. For all this to occur, however, sectarianism must slowly leave the scene, to be replaced by religious dialectic and dialogue.

The socio-economic sphere is, in Lebanon, closely connected to the religious one with its emphasis on confessional communities, whatever changes this connection has undergone. New interactive processes between communities will have to accompany the above reconsideration or reformulation of the National Pact and the introduction of secularism. These processes will serve new ends, a new *telos*, whereby problems of poverty, the middle class, inequalities, women's and children's rights, the disabled, and so on, are never fundamentally linked to religious-communal identities and institutions, but to a common struggle to reach equality and justice. Debates may then be initiated with the aim of formulating new maxims governing socio-economic issues, and having universal validity and axiological relevance. While religions may continue to engage in some of their charitable work, the state should offer universal, non-religion-bound aid that takes precedence over and is superior to religiously-restricted aid. In other words, the individual must see in the state the guarantor of a cohesion that is not only above any other but also ensures that all forms of cohesion are possible since it prepares and secures the space wherein all interactions can both take place and do so in freedom.

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[4] "[...] ist [...] *Glaube, wenn er sich nicht ständig der Möglichkeit des Unglaubens aussetzt, auch kein Glauben, sondern eine Bequemlichkeit.*" My translation of the same line is: "... when faith does not continually expose itself to the possibility of unfaith, it is no faith at all, but a convenience."

This productive conflict will be a fertile ground for the discovery and creation of new conceptual complexes leading to advancement at every level. New concepts will arise whose content and definition will be open to dynamic reconsideration, and they will generate ever new relational complexes, mobilising social, spiritual and intellectual hubs that will augment individual and national powers of development and cohesion. They will especially develop new common analytical and synthetic grounds and "meeting places," whose purpose will be the defining and redefining of "belonging" and "being together." Once again, we can offer an example to illustrate this foundational operation through productive conflict.

One notion that will arise as the generator of a conceptual complex, provoking into relational motion a whole set of concepts whose combination through productive, conflictual work will always be specific and unique, is that of "Lebanese earth." Once we decide, having interacted in social and intellectual meeting places, to accept this notion and explore its meaning and effectiveness, as well as our renewed relation to it with the aim of increasing conjoined powers of general advancement, a whole constellation of prominent and increasingly complex notions will emerge. This "earth" notion opens up the *Heimat*, the home, and thus also the land as home and possibility of home, and then the concept of space. We soon find ourselves in the earth-land-homeland-space complex. This conceptual complexity is also conceptual precision, so that what is ever more complex is accompanied by an ever clearer and more precise/distinct vision and thus efficacious political provision and legislation. Hence, a spiritual element, in the Hegelian sense, enters the equation as both an essential mode and concept interacting with this complex and bringing in notions to develop, such as that of "residing" or the "hearth." What began as a concept of earth and was taken into the earth-land-homeland-space complex develops the very specific ideas of a "spiritual residing" under heaven and on earth, which can later be utilised to establish a nationwide bond that is always negotiated, strengthened, reconfigured and reasserted. Such a bond, being

the repeated and renewed result of "dialogic-communicative reason," to use Habermas' phrase, and employed across communities in productive conflictual work, will be beyond any parochial consideration in its very universally-binding character, as well as in the freedom always involved in its determination. It will, through this "Lebanese earth" idea, have the power to integrate the elements of the "conflictual" process, creating a "whole" which will in turn produce the meaning, direction and efficacy of its deployment. "Lebanese earth" is thus not only a physical, geographical, geological question or matter, but implies a reconsideration of notions such as "belonging," "Lebanese history," "respect for our environment," "Lebanese education," and so on.

There is of course much more involved in the question of "earth." Needless to say, it is one fraught with controversies, especially if approached from a Marxist perspective. This is not the issue here. Neither should one think that we are somehow "deifying" earth, since we are making it a ground of possibilities and not a *summum ens*, the highest being; earth may be transcendental, in the Kantian sense, but is never transcendent. Suffice it to say that it is one notion that lends itself well to new configurations and conceptual work through productive conflict, which implies each time re-appropriation, revolution and productive work, as I have interpreted these terms, far beyond mere negative tolerance. The Other, local and international, textual and spiritual, is to be approached and engaged, communities are to be newly articulated and placed in danger, in the sense I have expounded, and a people will move forward as institutions guarantee the kind of education and *polis* ushered in and shaped through these modes of interaction and life-sharing, *al-'aysh al mushtarak* (العيش المشترك).

I end with this key term, *al-'aysh al mushtarak*, since it frames, along with the urgent need I began with, this whole article and the project it proposes. The urgent need that is now ours is met through reappropriation, revolution, productive conflict, and conceptual complexes, so as to give full power and sustainability to "living together." This will be done,

finally, by giving meaning to this "living together," turning it from an empty notion as an instrument for propaganda to a living concept that permeates the lives of people and communities, making their thinking mobile and so becoming a "pro-ject" in the Heideggerian sense. The concept in fact amounts to a thinking that is *futural* and responsible, taking root in the temporal and historical possibilities of *Dasein*, a people "being there" in their world (Heidegger, 1927, pp. 52-9) or, more specifically, on Lebanese earth as interpreted above. And where there is responsibility, there will also and inevitably be reasonableness and reason – and hence philosophy.

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