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"From Marty's Square to the Global Stage: An Analysis of the Spatial Dialectics of the 2019 Lebanese Thawra"

By Miriam Aitken

Under the supervision of Professor Tamirace Fakhoury

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« La révolution est faite par les gens, qui envahissent les places, ou les créent en bloquant des routes, pour demander, principale revendication – mais pas la seule – le départ d'une classe politique corrompue qui a prouvé son incapacité à gouverner le pays »
Camille Ammoun, *Octobre Liban*

In October 2019 protestors took over squares in Beirut, Tripoli, Paris, London and New York, forming a social movement that the Lebanese would call their 'revolution'. This essay conducts a spatial analysis of the 2019 Lebanese *Thawra* and discusses how the spatialities of the protests, both in Lebanon and abroad, can be understood. Without ignoring the significance of the protests' national scale, distinguishing the movement from previous protest episodes that were mostly confined to Beirut, this essay focuses on two extremes on the spatial scale. On the one hand, it takes a hyper-local lens and focuses on the protests occurring in and around Martyr's Square in Beirut's Central District. On the other, it discusses the diaspora protests taking place across the world. It thus shows how the movement was de-territorialised through the diaspora protests, demonstrating the disassociation of citizenship and the political arena from the territorial nation state through the transnationalisation of political struggle and solidarities. Concurrently, however, it demonstrates the movement's deep situatedness in the symbolism and politicised space of downtown Beirut, both in its tactical repertoires and in the constitution of the movement's collective identity and vision. To make sense of these seeming contradictions, this essay follows the 'spatial dialectics' approach taken by Halvorsen in his analysis of Occupy London. In a first step, the theoretical framework and methodology is laid out by conceptualising the notion of space and spatial dialectics. Secondly, the local lens is adopted to analyse the symbolism and politicisation of urban space in Beirut before discussing the movement's constitution through and grounding in the public space of Beirut Central District. Finally, the transnational conception of citizenship and the political sphere is discussed and applied to the example of Lebanese diaspora protests during the 2019 *Thawra*. Thus, it argues that the Lebanese *Thawra* is both intimately tied to the 'local' and part of the

'transnational' and 'global'. This seeming contradiction is in itself constitutive of the movement by providing tangible support for the protests on the ground in Lebanon and by contributing to the social construction of identity and belonging.

## I.	Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Space and Spacialities of Social Movements

Scholars of social movements increasingly analyse contentious politics through a spatial lens. The contributions to Social Movement Theory of geographers such as Miller demonstrate this. Miller (2020) argues that spatial discrimination of state and economic policies, such as the uneven geographical distribution of funds and services, can spark grievances leading to collective action. Furthermore, he shows how the characteristics of the places social movements are situated in affect their ability to mobilise resources and the political opportunity structure they operate in. Similarly, the geographic scale – local, national, transnational – at which a social movement operates impacts its strategies and leverage (Nicholls, 2007). Moreover, reflecting the cultural turn in Social Movement Theory, scholars have highlighted the role of lived, perceived and conceived space in constructing cognitive frameworks, or what Walford (2004; 409) calls "spatial imaginaries." These allow social movements to mobilise and to formulate collective claims based on individuals' lived experiences in and conceptions of space.

This threefold conception of space – as perceived, conceived, and lived – reflects Henri Lefebvre's theorisation of space as a social and political product. As opposed to a geographic 'place', 'space', in Lefebvre's view, does not exist outside of the social forces that construct it, both materially and mentally (Elden, 2007). Perceived space is the product of material, physical design through, for example, urban planning and construction. Conceived space, on the other hand, is the mental construct, the abstract space, shaped by codes of conduct and the imaginary

(Larkin, 2010). Finally, lived space combines the real and the imagined through its use in everyday life which imbues it with meaning and symbolism (Elden, 2007). This Lefebvrian conception shows the political nature of space the inherent contention over space, both physical and imagined, during social movements and contentious episodes.

Spatial Dialectics

To make sense of the seeming contradiction of the simultaneous spatial groundedness and de-territorialisation of the 2019 Lebanese *Thawra*, the notion of spatial dialectics is useful. The principle of dialectics, rooted in Marxist philosophy, is based on the idea that development, movement or change is a "unity of opposites" (McGill & Parry, 1948; 418). Every phenomenon has a polar structure of internal oppositions whose tension creates flux. Thus, in a dialectical conception, contradictions are objectified and embodied in a phenomenon. This view breaks with the logics-based conception of contradiction. Logic maintains the principle of invalidity of contradictions, whereby something cannot be A and not-A at the same time (Schaff, 1960). Dialectics, however, views contradiction not as incompatible but as containing internal opposites which are themselves constitutive of a phenomenon. In analysing Occupy London as a global movement that became tied to its place of protest in central London, Halvorsen (2017) analyses the mutually supporting, yet simultaneously undermining spatial dimensions of the protest and develops the notion of spatial dialectics. Thus, he argues that the territorialised strategies of Occupy London both supported and undermined the global claims-making of the movement. The contradictory spatialities of the movement, therefore, allow Halvorsen to understand the nature, but also the inherent weaknesses, of Occupy London. By conceiving of contradiction through a dialectical lens, therefore, the seemingly contradicting spatialities of the Lebanese *Thawra* acquire meaning and constitutive value.

## II.	#ReclaimYourPublicSpaces – *Thawra* through a Local Lens

This section focuses on the early protests in autumn 2019 centred in and around downtown Beirut. In the early days of the *Thawra*, Martyr's Square was the epicentre of the uprising (Zakharai, 2020). Squares, like Cario's Tahrir Square, played an important role in the 2011 Arab Spring (Kraidy, 2017). Similarly, Beirut's own 'Spring', the Independence Intifada in 2005, was centred around Martyr's Square and was heavily shaped by the use of public space (Haugbolle, 2006). Correspondinly, Sinno (2020) argues that the *Thawra* "used underutilized public space" (193) transforming them into collective spaces of belonging. To understand how, it is important to analyse the politics of urban space in Beirut and the spatial practices of the 2019 *Thawra.*

Urban Space in Beirut

Beirut's public spaces are both rare and shaped by political, social and economic forces. With only 0.8 m^2 of green space per capita, Beirut displays a "dense urban fabric with rare breathing spaces shared by an ever growing population" (Mady, 2014). Since the pre-war years and especially from the Civil War onwards, political and sectarian parties have demarcated their turf, displaying symbols and logos in the neighbourhoods under their influence (Haugbolle, 2006). Yassin (2012; 205) argues that this controlling of spaces becomes part of the "assertiveness of collective identity" where "territoriality becomes a means for reproducing sectarianism and group boundaries." During the 1975-1990 Civil War, these divisions manifested themselves violently as Beirut was segregated between sectors controlled by different military factions. The dividing border between east and west Beirut, the Green Line, passed through Beirut Central District ending at Martyr's Square which, far from its cosmopolitan flair of the pre-war era, became a deserted void (Sinno, 2020). While the war destroyed much of Beirut's urban and social fabric, the reconstruction plans systematically

razed what little remained in central Beirut (Larkin, 2010). The company with the exclusive mandate to lead the reconstruction, Solidère, proved as controversial in its *tabula rasa* approach that dispossessed thousands of people, as in the circumstances of its appointment. Founded by Rafiq Hariri, the company's mandate raised questions of corruption and the privatization and commercialisation guiding its reconstruction project have led scholars to question the 'publicness' of the space created (Sinno, 2020). Aiming to create a cosmopolitan, luxurious city centre to attract tourism and investment, downtown Beirut eradicated both pre-war public spaces of encounter and erased any trace of war-time memory. The preservation of certain heritage – such as the Roman baths – constructed a selective historical narrative grounded in a glorious past that erases Lebanon's recent history, creating a social amnesia (Larkin, 2010). The effects of this urban topography on shaping collective memory and reinforcing divisive sectarian identities has been studied by scholars such as Larkin (2010) and Seidman (2019). Downtown Beirut has thus become a space whose access is strictly controlled through direct security measures, such as the Place de l'Étoile where the Lebanese Parliament is located, or through indirect socio-economic barriers to the high-end retail and business facilities dominating the area. At the same time, the symbolism of the space has made it a focal point for protests, such as the 2005 Independence Intifada and most recently the 2019 *Thawra.*

Spatial Repertoires and the construction of alternative spatial imaginaries

In the early days of the 2019 *Thawra,* Lebanese people reclaimed physical, visual and imaginary space in downtown Beirut. The street markets, food stalls, open-air festival and tent cities created an "agora where a common political culture seems to be forming" (Atallah, 2019). This tactical repertoire of occupation represented a territorial strategy that allowed the movement both to resist and create (Halvorsen, 2017). By contrasting the polished elitism of the downtown space with tents, music and street art, the protestors physically and visually

resisted and reclaim the space created by Solidère's reconstruction (Fawaz & Serhan, 2020). The strategy of occupation, fuelled by the hashtag #ReclaimYourPublicSpace, was further complemented by strategic staging of concerts, teach-outs and discussion groups. The use of the abandoned structures of the Egg Cinema and the Grand Theatre – war time remnants and previously inaccessible to the public – further underlined the symbolism of place and space. Beyond reclaiming the material dimensions of space, these activities constructed a collective identity and spatial imaginary. Aoun (2020) thus points to the "development of citizenship" and the elimination of sectarianism from discourse through the reclamation of public space. From a critical perspective, it must be recognized that the seemingly euphoric unity of Martyr's Square did not last. While contention became protracted and the cumulative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and Lebanon's financial collapse caused further fractures in the movement, the protests did create the possibility of an alternative conceived space. Through the lived experience of the material space of downtown Beirut, therefore, the protest constructed a societal imaginary that fueled the revolution.

III.   Transnationalism and Diaspora Protests

On the other extreme of the spatial scale of the Lebanese *Thawra* were the protests taking place in the diaspora, from London to Paris and New York (Salhani, 2019). While there is no reliable number on the exact size of the Lebanese diaspora, estimates uniformly indicate that there are more Lebanese living outside of Lebanon than in the country. Definitional difficulties are compounded by the fact that there is no one experience of diaspora; they can include temporary expats, Lebanese-born emigrants and individuals from early waves of emigration without Lebanese nationality, who do not speak Lebanese but retain a Lebanese identity (Verdeil & Dewailly, 2019). During the 2019 *Thawra* diaspora Lebanese participated in the social movement in a multiplicity of ways. In order to conceptualise the transnational spatiality of the

Thawra, one must consider the transnationalisation of social movements and the impact of the diaspora protests on Lebanese in Lebanon and abroad.

Transnational social movements and de-territorialised citizenship

Social movements depend on collective action, presupposing the existence of some form of common identity leading people to come together. In the case of transnational social movements, collective action spreads beyond the common denominator of shared territorial experience. Social movement scholars have theorized the transnationalisation of social movements through notions of diffusion and 'scale shifts' (Tarrow & McAdam, 2005). In this conception, diaspora protests would constitute a clear example of relational diffusion, whereby social networks develop from local to global through pre-existing ties, in this case a common identity and origin. However, critical geographers have criticized the over-reliance on territoriality in conceiving spaces of belonging and call for conceptions of space to overcome the local-global dichotomy (Massey, 2004; Featherstone, 2003). They thus argue that "spatial boundaries are no longer purposively territorial or scalar" (Amin, 2004; 33) but that space can be constituted independently of a bounded territorial place. This reflects developments in Critical Citizenship Studies that conceive of post-national and de-territorialized notions of citizenship. Ní Mhurchú (2014) thus argues that citizenship needs to be detached from the status as a rights-bearing subject in a particular bounded community in order to reflect its social, cultural, political and symbolic dimensions beyond just legal status. In this view, citizenship in enacted through cognitive constructions, solidarity networks and a collective recognition of belonging (Ataç et al., 2016). Finally, scholars have argued that citizenship and diaspora identity are themselves sites of contention and constituted through strategic processes of social construction, framing and political mobilisation. Adamson (2008; 24) thus argues that diasporas can be seen as strategically constructed "transnational 'imagined communities' based

on a particular identity category." In analysing the diaspora protests during the Lebanese *Thawra,* these notions are informative in understanding how the protests both constitutive of the revolution and of the articulation of diasporic identity.

Diaspora protests and the global stage of contention

Diaspora involvement in the Lebanese *Thawra* took on many forms. Some Lebanese returned to Lebanon to take part in the protests, while others staged demonstrations in their home cities, reproducing the street protests across the world. Furthermore, various organisations were founded with the aim of contributing to the protestors' efforts materially and financially. An example is Impact Lebanon, a non-profit started by members of the Lebanese diaspora in London which became one of the major fundraising initiatives following the August 4 Beirut blast. Finally, political pressures by Lebanese diaspora movements on the governments in their countries of residence resulted in tangible gains for the revolution, influencing the political opportunity structure of the movement. For example, Lebanese in Switzerland lobbied for the freezing of Lebanese politicians' assets held in Swiss banks and investigations are currently ongoing into the central bank chief, Riad Salamé's, alleged embezzlement of 300 million dollars (Cornish & Jones, 2021). Furthermore, the *Association Collectif des Victimes des Pratiques Frauduleuses et criminelles au Liban* together with the French anti-corruption NGO Sherpa has filed a complaint before the financial prosecutor's office in Paris for suspicions of fraud and money laundering (Galluccio, 2021). As these examples show, the diaspora participation in the 2019 *Thawra* expanded the stage of contention, contributed to the mobilisation of resources and put pressure on Lebanese élites. This shaped political opportunity structures through a "boomerang pattern" (Tsutsui & Smith, 2017) in which international institutions, in this case foreign state institutions, give leverage to local activists' struggles. Finally, while diaspora Lebanese recognised the privilege of selective and comparatively low-

risk participation in the revolution, the *Thawra* constituted a formative experience for diasporic identity through emotions of pride, guilt, grief and ultimately a sense of care for and belonging to Lebanon.

Conclusion: Constitutive spatial contradictions

In conclusion, the seemingly contradictory spatialities of the Lebanese *Thawra* was constitutive of the movement's ability to make its claims, mobilise resources and construct an alternative common social imaginary. The protests in Beirut's Martyr's Square allowed the Lebanese to reclaim physical, abstract and lived space. Diaspora Lebanese's involvement provided tangible material and financial resources and created pressure on the Lebanese élite from abroad. In both cases, the collective experience of protest was allowed the construction of a Lebanese identity and a sense of belonging that transcended sectarian divisions as well as territorial borders. The dialectical understanding of contradicting spatialities, therefore, provides a way to derive meaning from the opposing dynamics of space in the Lebanese *Thawra.*

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