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Forging Solidarities: Queer Voices in the October 17 Revolution

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Introduction

The October 17 revolution saw millions of people take to the streets of Beirut and all major cities in what would become the country's largest protest movement in decades. Chanting in unison against corruption, sectarianism, patriarchy, classism…, people from broad socioeconomic, religious, and geographic backgrounds came together to topple the country's octogenarian political establishment and demand radical change. Among them was the LGBTQI+ community who, since day one, has been at every protest, every roadblock, mobilized by the same demands as their fellow protesters. Such a reclaiming of public spaces in a way that allows for discussion and interaction helped create new forms of solidarity in a country deeply affected by sectarian divides.

In this context, it is instrumental to consider the potentialities generated by the October 17 revolution for queer[1] movements to construct new solidarities. Lebanese political organizing has a history of becoming co-opted by sectarian ruling elites, causing internal dissent and ultimately leading to the movements' collapse. Such was the case of labor unions, considered historically as relatively independent and capable of standing up to the ruling militias, but which collapsed in the 1990s due to repression and co-optation by the ruling factions (Baumann, 2016). This pattern was also manifest in the #You_Stink or #Tol3et_Ri7etkon movement following the 2015 garbage crisis, whereby the political elite co-opted the political movement through discourse – adopting the protesters' demands and claiming them as their own[2] – and the infiltration of "*mundassin*," partisan supporters who would confuse the medias with diverging demands or raise their own slogans (Geha, 2016). It is therefore all the more important for political movements to foster solidarity within the movement and with other groups of the population in order to ensure their durability. I will thus attempt to examine the possibilities for alliance-building which arise in the context of political and social instability, with a particular focus on the October 17 revolution in Lebanon. For that purpose, I will specifically examine the queer political movement that was present within the protests –specifically, the ways in which they interacted with the wider political movement.

The idea of exploring how solidarity can be forged across gender, religious, racial, economic, social, and national divide allows us to organize collective strategies for unity against common oppressors. In fact, according to Scholz (2008), political solidarity is a bond that unites a group of people who are collectively reacting to a state of injustice, oppression, social vulnerability, or tyranny. In the following pages, I will first highlight the new possibilities and opportunities that moments of socioeconomic and political crisis present for the formation of cross-movement solidarities. I will then move on to examine the importance of assembly and building emotional bonds between movements. I argue that reciprocal solidarity can only be achieved through the lens of intersectionality and therefore a departure from NGOization and single-issue activism. Lastly, I conclude that while the October 17 revolution has provided many opportunities for queer organizing in Lebanon to build cross-movement solidarities, further grassroots activism is still needed to ensure the durability of these solidarity bonds.

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[1] In this article, I use the term "queer" in its post-identity sense to refer to a radical politics which opposes a neoliberal, single-issue activism reliant on the politics of visibility and respectability and seeking approval from the state. In this sense, "queer politics" is opposed to neoliberal "lesbian and gay" or "LGBT politics." Queering requires deconstructing and dismantling existing political structures and ties the liberation of LGBT-identifying individuals with the liberation of other, including heterosexual, marginalized populations.

[2] For instance, following one of the largest demonstrations of the movement on August 29th 2015, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) held a large rally in which the energy minister himself expressed his concern over power outages, a major point of contention of the protestors.

The potentiality of crises in fostering cross-movement solidarity

In the months leading up to the October 17 revolution, Lebanon had been facing a deep accumulation of economic, financial, environmental, and political crises, mutually interweaving and magnifying each other. The popular uprising of the Palestinian camps that lasted all of summer 2019 mobilized against deprivation and the further deterioration of living conditions. Ironically, it is this context of insecurity and deprivation which, a couple of months later, allowed the people to emancipate themselves from the ruling political elite and to gather in the streets demanding radical change. In an interview with the Legal Agenda, Kamal Hamdan (2019) identified the "breadcrumbs system" as an important factor in the reproduction of the ruling class in Lebanon since the civil war. This is a phenomenon whereby ruling factions seize "public institutions and their resources. Then they distribute "breadcrumbs" of public resources [i.e. job opportunities, healthcare services, education…] in an unlawful manner to their followers." This allowed factions to acquire the population's loyalty on a sectarian basis, thereby reproducing the necessary premises of the political economy of sectarianism (Baumann, 2016). However, by the end of the year 2019, the effects of the worsening economic crisis were being felt by a large part of the population, a quarter of which were living below the poverty line. Across Lebanon, 1.2 million people lived on less than 8.6 dollars per day, of whom 250 to 300 thousand lived on less than 5.7 dollars per day, the threshold of extreme poverty (Gemayel, 2019). The situation has only deteriorated since.

Scholars have emphasized the historical importance of political and economic crises as an impetus for social change, especially in the Lebanese context. In fact, the Lebanese civil war (Mohamed, 2015; Baumann, 2016) and the 2006 Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon (Makerem, 2020; Naber et. al, 2014), as well as the destabilizing effect of the 2011 Arab Spring, and the 2015 "garbage crisis" (AbiYaghi et al. 2017) have been recognized as having represented a window of opportunity for various political and anti-sectarian movements to gain traction. These crises undermined the ruling class's capacity to provide services to the wider population, thereby allowing new opportunities for social and political organizing to rise to the occasion. It is thus important to recognize the long history of anti-sectarian activism, which preceded and to a large extent enabled the October revolution of 2019, and to learn from their successes – and their mistakes.

One example of queer activists responding to crisis in a way that forged solidarities with the local population was Helem's sizeable movement of providing relief services to people displaced in the South during the 2006 invasion of Israel. This show of solidarity allowed LGBTQ organization Helem to open relations with groups and organizations that would not have worked with them under different circumstances (Makarem, 2020; Naber et. al, 2014). Likewise, the economic context leading up to the October 17 revolution allowed for further destruction of the capability of the ruling class to provide services to their followers. In that sense, the disintegration of the economy radically destabilized this power structure which maintained the status quo. Sectarian leaders no longer had the means to buy their followers' loyalties through clientelist distribution of services and favors. Left with nothing to lose, the population was effectively emancipated from the material bonds which tied them to the ruling factions and took to the streets to protest against the corruption, mismanagement of funds, and oppression of the state. United in the streets against a regime which served none of their interests, people from all walks of life were able to meet each other, sometimes for the first time, and forge a newfound sense of solidarity in their common precarity.

The affective and corporeal power of assembly

While times of socioeconomic and political crises are effective at breaking, even if momentarily, vertical clientelist ties between the people and the ruling class, they do not suffice to create new horizontal solidarity bonds between factions of the population. It is important to emphasize the role of assembly and collective mobilization of various groups in public spaces in forging new alliances. In Lebanon specifically, Sofian Merabet famously characterized the absence of a “gay community,” defined as “a coherent and encompassing group of people sharing similar, even if competing, positions and aspirations and where the sexual preference becomes a cardinal point of identity construction” (Merabet, 2004, p. 32). What he identified instead is merely a homosexual sphere, characterized by “hierarchies of urban mobility” (Merabet, 2014, p. 74) due to intersecting elements of class, sect, geographic location, etc. which determine individuals’ access to certain spaces. This effect is further exacerbated by the rampant privatization which has rendered public spaces nearly extinct in Lebanon. For decades, the street has been a way to get to places, rather than a public space in itself. Reclaiming public space in the form of assembling in the streets and public areas becomes all the more crucial to building lasting solidarity bonds within queer movements as well as with larger communities. Indeed, the occupation of abandoned theaters, parking lots, city streets, roundabouts, public squares, and bridges allowed the people to reclaim public spaces for collective social and political debates. The October 17 revolution saw people building tents and organizing discussions open to the public on varied topics as the causes of the economic crisis, the problems with the justice system, and how to achieve regime change. People from all walks of life were welcome to join and to debate on topics that concerned the future of the people as a whole. This space allowed for further contact between LGBTQ+ movements and other groups who came together to discuss common struggles and strategies to overcome them collectively.

Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013) have defined this type of assembly as “a corporeal and affective disposition of stasis that derails, if only temporarily, normative presuppositions about what may come into being as publicly intelligible and sensible in existing polities” (p. 150-151). In this sense, gatherings of various groups of the population allows for a temporary transmutation of the collective imaginary which destabilizes what has been classed as normative. This allows for the formation of a potential “queer futurity,” a concept introduced by Muñoz (2009) to denote a queer utopianism which breaks away from the present, rejecting political pragmatism and nihilism in favor of a brighter future. It is this destabilization of the normative during the October 17 revolution which allowed for the population to imagine alternative ways of living and of being, and reject compromises in the name of pragmatism and opportunism.

Butler and Athanasiou (2013) rightly emphasized the double character of this assembly, which is affective as well as corporeal. In fact, affect plays an active role in building solidarities across movements. Reporting on the lived experience of feminist activists from around the world practicing solidarity, Karaman (2016) insists on the importance of feelings, specifically, bonds of friendship between the individuals participating in different movements. Creating friendships involves building a sense of trust and familiarity between individuals, which is best achieved through a certain level of proximity (material or virtual). While popular gatherings on the street are generally recognized as symbolic of the collective rejection of the ruling class, I argue that it is also what *constitutes* this collective. Collectivity cannot exist without a form or another of assembly. Popular assembly allows for increased material and affective proximity of groups that could not have been in such proximity otherwise. In the October 17 revolution, young disenfranchised men from conservative backgrounds stood next to queer and trans individuals, chanting the same revolutionary chants and dancing alongside them to the same revolutionary music. This personal contact is key in slowly chipping away at the stigmatization of these queer individuals from the rest of society and building new solidarity bonds.

This phenomenon has also been observed, for instance, in the case of the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners movement in Wales. Miner families who had spent time with lesbian and gay activists supporting their strike against pit closures in 1985 had friendlier and more tolerant attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community (Kelliher, 2014). Similarly, contact with LGBTQ+ individuals within the context of the October 17 revolution undermines their portrayal as foreign – a symbol of Western imperialism threatening to recolonize Arabs by turning them into “Euro-American” subjects (Massad, 2007, p. 41). Witnessing their common suffering caused by the same sectarian system and corrupt ruling class which has disenfranchised the rest of the population allows to transcend identity politics in favor of queer liberation; hence, the LGBTQ+ community, instead of existing as a separate entity with separate interests and struggles, became part of a collective precarity that was the life-force of the revolutionary moments. This form of solidarity building required LGBTQ+ movements not only to mobilize for their individual rights, but also especially to mobilize in support of the wider population’s demands, as a form of collective queer utopia and futurity.

A departure from NGOization and liberal single-issue activism

The October 17 revolution provided an opportunity for LGBTQ+ organizing to revisit their own practices and priorities. It is important to note that back in 2006, as we mentioned, LGBTQ+ organizations like Helem were one of the first to react to the Israeli invasion and to join the grassroots solidarity movements that emerged during that time (Naber et al. 2014; Makarem, 2011). However, after the conflict ended, clashes within the organization and a change of presidency led to its transformation into a liberal, rights-based organization focused on single-issue activism around “gay rights” (Makarem, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that the organization has shifted directions since under a new leadership. However, by prioritizing certain identify formations, constellations of NGOs could end up contributing in ghettoizing them.

According to Islah Jad (2003), because of the structure of NGOs, the source of their funding, their resources, their focus on single issues, and their disconnect from and alienation of the “target population” they are meant to be empowering, NGOs cannot constitute or maintain a social movement which would allow for radical transformation of the political system. Firstly, the high levels of education and the use of elitist international development “lingo” by NGO leaders tend to patronize the rest of the population. The "target population" of NGOs are also not included in their decision- and policy-making process. And their reliance on Western or international funding means they have to respond to accusations of being "agents of the West" to the larger society. Accusations aside, funding agencies often have their own agendas which NGOs have to engage with in order to receive the necessary funds to carry out their projects. Thus, NGOization leads to the depoliticization of movements and the rise of pragmatic and opportunistic politics which value single-issue activism. This politics entrenches the power of the state, leading it to calculate what it can get away with if, for instance, it allows for some measure of LGBT freedom.

This is not to demonize all the contributions NGOs have made. Indeed, a lot of marginalized groups depend on NGOs for a range of services such as food, shelter, and charitable donations. In Lebanon, following the explosion of the Beirut port on August 4th, at least 384 organizations officially expressed their willingness to participate in the reconstruction of Beirut (Fawaz et al. 2020). Some NGOs work hard to propose new policies or spread information on important topics. We should nevertheless recognize their limited reach, especially when it comes to political mobilization or implementing radical change.

Depoliticization has affected much of LGBTQ+ organizing in Lebanon and is based on the neoliberalization of gay rights movements emblematic of what Puar (2007) calls homonationalism. Puar (2007) points out the danger in this kind of neoliberal lesbian and gay activism which does not seek to dismantle the dominant system of oppression but rather seeks more rights by being folded into and participating to the hegemonic order of the nation-state. This method only ends up displacing systems of oppression onto other less privileged groups and further legitimizes the state which commits this oppression. It therefore contributes to more divisions within the population rather than a collective solidarity movement against the oppressive regime.

Despite grappling with the same questions and limitations, members of the queer support group Meem,[3] which separated from Helem in 2007, engaged in feminist and queer politics. By doing so, they attempted not to ascribe to fixed identity politics concerning gender and sexuality. Rather than colluding with the political elite in order to achieve legal change which would have little significance to the daily lives of affected individuals, Meem depended on the critique of oppressive systems like as patriarchy, racism, sectarianism, heteronormativity, Zionism, and classism (Hamdan, 2015). However, this was not always possible, and it also did not represent the hegemonic tendency among LGBT groups.

Bitar (2017) illustrates the prevalence of this neoliberal and homonormative mentality in both the introduction of Beirut Pride in 2017 as well as the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, first recognized in Lebanon in 2005. Both of these have been widely criticized and problematized by some local queer activists for the way they divorce homophobia and transphobia from the underlying material and social structures that create and sustain them. Hence, Beirut Pride insisted on maintaining an apolitical stance, which only served to cater to privileged gay men who adhered to a respectable appearance, or what Merabet (2004) identified as the "disavowed homosexualities" ("*Ana mesh heek"*) of Lebanese gay men in the homosexual sphere. This young, cisgendered, able-bodied, respectable gay subject is considered worthy of visibility, with the exclusion of all others, especially those who come from marginalized or working-class backgrounds. Moreover, this ideal normative subject ends up being absorbed into and reinforcing nationalist discourses which depict non-citizens and refugees as a security threat (Bitar, 2017). Baumann (2016) has highlighted how in the 1990s, the exclusion of Syrian and Palestinian refugees from labor movements constituted a structural weakness which only served to alienate an important part of the population and weaken their position.

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[3] Meem is no longer publicly active today as an "organized" support group as it existed from 2007 to 2014. Its former members are, however, currently engaged in various activities and form an informal queer activist network.

LGBT organizing as represented by Beirut pride not only excludes marginalized individuals, but it also co-opts LGBT identities to reinforce state structures. Thus, NGOized, single-issue activism seeks recognition from the state instead of the radical dismantling of its oppressive structures. In 2017, for example, Beirut Pride appealed to the internal security forces (ISF), which has a history of harassing, incarcerating, and committing physical and sexual violence against the bodies of those whom it perceives as deviants, notably trans individuals, migrants, refugees, and the impoverished. This tendency was further exemplified when in the 2018 parliamentary elections, multiple LGBT NGOs came out in support of the right-wing supremacist Christian political party of the Phalanges for including in their political program the abolishment of article 534 incriminating sexual intercourse “against nature,” used to criminalize homosexual acts in Lebanon. This reflects LGBT single-issue activism’s perception of success as “visibility, complicity and institutionalization” (Abu Assab et al. 2020, p. 489) while eliding class and political struggles. The Phalanges never did end up implementing their promise, but that does not matter to our analysis. What matters is that this tactic contributes to the oppressive clientelist system of the state and benefits national interests instead of the people these organizations are meant to represent.

However, the LGBTQ+ mobilization in the October 17 revolution could represent a new era of queer activism. The revolution did indeed provide queer movements with the renewed opportunity to build a movement that defies NGOization and single-issue activism. In fact, LGBTQ+ activists on the streets of Beirut did not simply call for a recognition of gay rights (and, at times, other communities’ rights) by resorting to the system oppressing them in the first place. Instead, they mobilized for the dismantling of the sectarian system, for the end of corruption, for the abolition of the oppressive Kafala system, for the rights of refugees, and for an end to racism, classism, the patriarchy, and militarism. A look at the graffiti and slogans on the walls of downtown Beirut illustrates the multiplicity of struggles adopted by activists. In other words, they adopted a queer politics which aimed to dismantle multiple intersecting systems of oppression. One example of such a grassroots group is the feminist, non-sectarian online space Sawt Al-Niswa, which for a period of time was a project within Beirut’s feminist collective Nasawiya, before becoming an independent project on its own. On their webpage, Sawt Al-Niswa demonstrates solidarity with other marginalized groups when they unequivocally affirm that they “stand against racism, sexism, sectarianism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, in ourselves and in society” (Sawt Al-Niswa, n.d.), rather than focusing on identity politics and single-issue projects. Their last issue on the *thawra* showed solidarity with and included the voices of Palestinian refugees (Kaddoura, 2019), care workers and migrant domestic workers (Kaedbey, 2019), and individuals of all backgrounds whose daily lives and bodies are marked by constant struggle in the face of patriarchy, sectarianism, and capitalism (Sawt Al-Nisswa, 2019).

Many scholars capitalize on the importance of being committed to practicing intersectionality in building cross-movement solidarities (Karaman, 2016; Butler et al., 2013; Naber et. al, 2014; AlQaisiya, 2018; Makerem, 2011; Kelliher, 2014). Palestinian queers cannot be liberated without taking down the settlercolonial violence undergirding Zionist discourse and practices. For queers in Lebanon, they cannot be free without unlearning what the system taught us to exclude and oppress; it is only by this process of unlearning as solidarity that the sectarian, racist, misogynist, and corrupt system, which has been disenfranchising the population for decades, can be eradicated. Furthermore, Butler et al. (2013) argue that solidarity should not be based on the production of injury-formed identities and centering on the one (racism, sexism, homophobia…) that is the most injurious at a particular moment in time. Rather, we should expand our movements of resistance beyond simple concepts such as similitude or community and formulate our language in a way that defies discourses of alterity. This is precisely what queer activists in Lebanon did when they chanted for a revolution against all of the different systems of oppression subjugating the people.

Furthermore, practicing intersectionality allows for reciprocal solidarity to develop between the groups. A significant illustration of this phenomenon was highlighted by Younes (2020) writing for Human Rights Watch. She revealed that at the beginning of the protests, some anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric emerged – the word “faggot” in Arabic was used to insult and delegitimize Lebanese politicians of the ruling factions. However, counter-chants surfaced, claiming that “faggot is not an insult.” Over time, the effective counter-narrative sought the abandonment of such homophobic chants within the revolution.

Moving forward: The commitment to a politics of hope, regardless of the outcome

It has now been more than a year since the October 17 revolution started. Since then, the Covid-19 crisis has hastened the country’s economic meltdown. On August 4, 2020, the detonation of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in one of the port’s warehouses caused a major explosion at Beirut’s port, killing over 200 people, injuring over 6,500, and leaving up to 300,000 people without homes (ACAPS, 2020). The country’s worsening social, economic, and health crises have led to a decline in overall mobilization. In September and August 2020, ACLED reports the lowest number of protests and riots since September 2019 (ACLED, 2020). Lebanon’s political establishment has clung to power, resisting any change to the consociational political arrangement concretized in the Taëf agreement of 1990. And yet, the revolution has managed to create new solidarity links between different movements, including LGBTQ+ activism.

Nevertheless, Fakhoury and Aubarell (2021) invite us to understand the October 17 revolution beyond the reductionist binary of success vs. failure in dismantling the existing political system. They highlight instead the myriad of symbolic and societal transformations that the revolution has established, including the creation and revival of grassroots groups which are striving to create collaborative and solidarity-based spaces and platforms. This has for example led to the emergence of many fundraising and service provision initiatives, some of which from the LGBTQ+ community itself. For instance, Sarah Melhem, who owns the Beirut gay club “Ego,” organized fundraisings for those impacted by the explosion (NBC News, 2020). She claims that residents who were once homophobic now welcomed their support, which proved to them that the LGBTQ+ community is not separate from the rest of the population but is very much involved in community building. This allows for the creation of mutual care and solidarity networks.

In doing so, these activists endeavor to keep the revolution alive beyond mobilization in the streets and within everyday spaces. In fact, Lyna Comaty, speaking to the Lebanese Center for Policy studies, claims that in all social movements, protesting in the streets is only one of the numerous ways of political resistance, and has a limited momentum which cannot be sustained over prolonged periods of time. It is therefore strategic for mobilization tactics to evolve into other forms as well (LCPS, 2020). Creating new spaces for public assembly and solidarity-building is crucial in order to maintain a collective consciousness of political resistance within the population, even as active movements of protest have temporarily stopped. For instance, we can point to the role of cafe culture in Tripoli to bridge the divide and create solidarity bonds between youths of the two rival villages Bab Al-Tabbana and Jabal Mohsen (Kostrz, 2017). Chamas (2020) has also pointed to the role of Marxist reading groups in Beirut in cultivating solidarity and camaraderie, thereby maintaining and reproducing social and political movements. The October 17 revolution thus left behind a different sense of hope among the people and revived their commitment to a better future.

In the midst of loss and destruction, this piece insists on a politics of hope. Such an emphasis on hope and resistance is not ignorant of the deep struggles we are facing and the ones yet to come, but rather represents the commitment to an imagined “queer futurity” (Muñoz, 2009). This piece attempts to highlight the potentialities that come with moments of crisis and bereavement, not to romanticize suffering, or to idealize Lebanese (non)citizens’ continued resilience – as we have heard repeatedly in the “rising phoenix” metaphor. We are tired of resilience, because it implies the persistence of tragedy which we must overcome. Instead, a politics of hope tries to seize opportunities for change, wherever they may be, and pushes for a future where we will not have to be resilient any longer. To quote Solnit (2016): “Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists adopt the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It is the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand.” Hope is therefore presented here as an alternative to inaction due to both overly fatalistic pessimism and the blind optimism (or toxic positivity) adopted by a portion of the population as a coping mechanism against the backdrop of political and economic uncertainty. It is not simply a state of mind, or an empty assurance. It is a commitment – a politics. Sara Mourad (2014) indeed claimed that hope consists in the search for alternatives, rather than being itself the alternative. It is precisely because we not only recognize that moments of crisis come with incredible loss but also that the “everyday” has become unbearable for the vast majority of the population that we have a duty to search for opportunities to actualize “alternative forms of embodiment, alternative intimacies, alternative collectivities, and alternative lifeworlds” (Mourad, 2014).

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