

Note: this is very much a series of notes stitched together, so, please, do not circulate or cite. Eventually, my aim is to develop the questions offered here into a coherent paper that examines jokes and their relation to the affective structure of crisis.

Humor and Politics: Dispatches from the Lebanese Crisis
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On October 17, 2019 Lebanese residents took to the streets to protest a series of governmental decisions that promised to send the country further down a dark hole¹. People were stretched thin as it was given an array of policies and decisions imposed by the government at the behest of the Central Bank. The latter promised to shatter an already strained middle class, and threatened both the economic as well as the social infrastructure of the country. The brunt of the collapse, it was decided, would be absorbed by the most vulnerable and destitute. The wave of protests that took place across the country came to be known as the “October 17 Revolution.” In the early days of the protests, commentators and intellectuals alike, discussed the merits of calling the anti-government action as a “revolution.” While I am not interested in engaging in a classificatory and diagnostic exercise about the nature of the events unfolding on and after October 17, I do choose to call the events a revolution. This is very much an intentional move on my part. For one, revolutions are a topic of interest not just for political theorists, but also for the social and humanistic sciences writ large. The importance of calling it a revolution stems not only from the choice made by those on the ground to call it as such, but also from the centrality of revolutions to understanding the social and political form. The revolution failed in more ways than it succeeded. It failed at uprooting an entrenched sectarian system, failed at challenging

¹ I use the expression “Lebanese residents” intentionally since there were many groups of people who participated in the protests, all of whom resided in Lebanon but were not necessarily Lebanese.

clientelist political structures, failed at ending the rule of the Central Bank, and failed at displacing the government's neoliberal agenda. But why did the revolution fail? What is the relationship between crisis and revolution and why is history riddled with at once particular and universal experiences of crisis and repetition?

Throughout the ongoing collapse, Lebanese residents turned to jokes and laughter to vent, to make sense of the seemingly unintelligible, to illustrate the absurdity of the situation, and to cope with surplus-emotions in an effort to carry on despite the 'too-muchness' of living conditions. The everyday in Lebanon, it seems, necessitates a unique level of engaging one's misfortunes through laughter. In my paper, I delve into the centrality and importance of jokes to both, understanding revolutionary times, and to exploring the potential limits of language in expressing surplus-emotions and excess feeling. I begin with jokes not only because of the speed at which they are produced and disseminated using internet-based messaging apps and social media platforms, but also because jokes are an underrated form of communication that spreads in non-exclusive circles. For this reason, I view jokes as a way of inquiring about certain forms of organizing political life in the world: indeed, jokes are at once non-threatening and dangerous. They offer an affectively safe space for reckoning with the unbearable excess of life itself in times of crisis, and reveal hard truths that could end-up making our enemies small. In the case of Lebanon, I argue that jokes are not only diagnostic but they also offer an approach to understanding social relations while resisting attempts to individual universal struggles. Furthermore, jokes tell us what is hiding in plain sight, they interpellate the revolutionary subject and propose a 'linked-fate' approach to politics. A sort of laughing alone, but also, laughing together. In our solitary engagement with a joke through laughter, the commonality of laughter brings us together. The recognition of that which is funny creates a communal feeling that binds

us together in our aloneness. There is both loneliness and social connectedness, there is isolation and belongingness. In my research, I pay particular attention to the expression “al-moudhik al-moubki” (“that which makes us laugh and cry”) or the *tragi-comique*. I zoom-in not only on the material, symbolic, and embodied effects of jokes but also on the function they serve in sublimating that which cannot be expressed linguistically. In doing so, I turn to the non-linguistic and affective economies of jokes and the function they play.

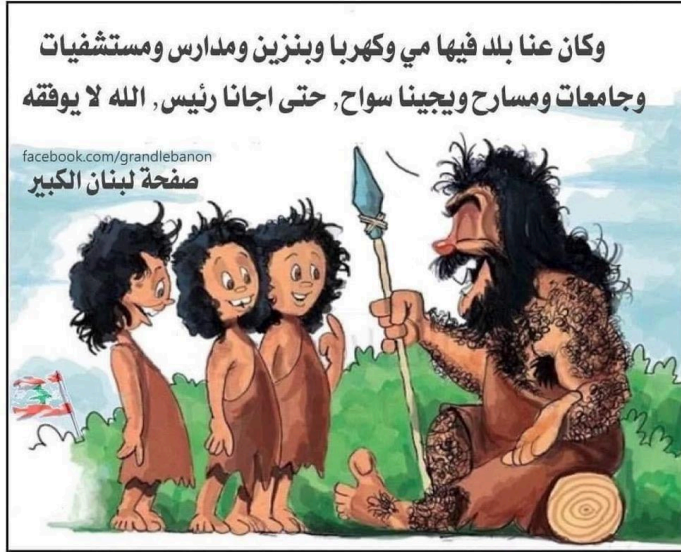
I also begin with jokes because they are an underrated form of communication that circulates in non-exclusive circles. Jokes are a way to organize a form of inquiry into certain forms of existing in the world. They are an organized heading that gathers together and invites a deep dive into the deepest clusters of contemporary modes of being. They tell us to look, and invite into a political world that they simultaneously depoliticize. The circulation of jokes transcends social and economic classes, and disrupts the boundaries of reason, revolution, and change. One thing has been true in the past few years in Lebanon, and that is that within moments of any political event, a meme, skit, or joke will be deployed and will make its round on people’s phones. What’s in a joke? Or better yet, what’s in a laugh? What is the function that jokes have? And why is it important to listen to what the conspicuously present joke has to say?

Jokes offer an entry point, a telling thing that somehow holds a key to a larger thing. Harmless, so it seems, but persecuted and censored precisely because of their power. It would be myopic, even dangerous to ignore the important function that jokes play. For one, if a joke lands well, it completely deregulates the material body, throwing it into disarray. Jokes are dangerous. And they are dangerously diagnostic. If read and interpreted at face value, they may appear silly, a dismissable laughable attempt at relief. The following pages will reveal that taken seriously, jokes serve a radically disruptive function that goes beyond diagnosing the state of social and

political arrangements. They tell a story, one that we know but refuse to listen to, one that is revelatory, as well as emancipatory.

Writing about Lebanon is like shooting at a moving target. Indeed, I'm writing this paper after the collapse, or perhaps before the real collapse has even happened. I'm writing between promises that the worst has passed, and assertions that things could be worse. Most importantly, I'm writing at a time when it is both too late and too early for change to happen. In my research, I showcase what it looks like to have gone through cycles of compounded crises. I demonstrate, through a retelling of events in a condensed manner, the symbolic, affective, and material effects of the collapse on the everyday which in turn reveals how and why the potential for real politics or perhaps a politics of the Real has been impossible thus far. It is tempting to call the events that have been unfolding in Lebanon since the Civil War as a series of unfortunate events but that would be a grave mischaracterization of the still unfolding situation. Indeed, what's been happening in Lebanon is not so much related to chance as it is to the inevitability of collapse under the current rule of neoliberal capitalism. Since the 1970s an array of economic and political decisions, policies, and interventions have engineered a crisis-in-waiting in Lebanon. How did things get so bad? And why should what is taking place in Lebanon matter at all?

Let me tell you a joke to illustrate why jokes are so central to crisis and repetition.



*This image circulated on social media, and on internet-based communication apps in Lebanon in 2019 and 2020, when the economic collapse and the Lebanese uprisings were happening.

The cartoon above shows four characters: three children, and one adult. All are portrayed as conventional prehistoric “caveman” figures and are wearing what appears to be animal skin. The adult is hairy and disheveled, sitting on a log, holding a spear made of wood and stone with his left hand. His eyes are closed, and his right hand is open in a palm-up position as he tells the children: “and we had a country that had water, electricity, gas, schools, hospitals, universities, theater, and we had tourists visiting us, until we got a president, may God curse him.” The children have long hair, too. They are standing, smiling, as they listen to the story that the adult recounts. One of the children’s index fingers is pointing toward their chin, suggesting simultaneous confusion, surprise, and engrossment. The characters are drawn at the forefront of the cartoon; they are superimposed on a well-maintained, lush, and vibrant green wilderness. In the bottom left-hand corner of the cartoon, a Lebanese flag flutters. The anachronism of some elements of the joke suggest a rupture with real historical time, indicating that Lebanon is an anomaly on the historical timeline, a glitch. The flag and the well-kept wilderness contribute to the idea that within modern-day Lebanon, the characters are living like they would in prehistoric

times. The joke attributes blame to a vague “president,” thus exemplifying the simultaneously unique and universal nature of the situation. Below the caveman’s speech bubble is a link to the Facebook page that the joke is taken from (facebook.com/grandlebanon). Underneath that, the name of the Facebook page is written in Arabic: “The Greater Lebanon page,” indicating the page’s ownership of the joke. “Le Grand Liban” or “Greater Lebanon” was Lebanon’s name under French mandate. The flag, however, is that of independent, modern-day Lebanon. It flutters in the background, a distant memory. Empire, too, lurks in the image via the page name, as the country’s past or, possibly, as a viable future, depending on how you see it.

The joke above stitches together multiple critiques and thus has multiple layers of meaning. One is about temporality and the seeming distortion of real historical time, another is about the state as represented by the head of state and its role in the dispossession of peoples, yet another is nostalgia for a distant past, and a yearning for a lost future. So, what’s the punchline? What’s funny about a joke that both depicts the repeated dispossession of the Lebanese people and also seems to romanticize the French colonial enterprise? The joke is not necessarily intended to generate laughter but to offer painful insights in an affectively safe context. Since Lebanon’s economic collapse in August 2019, Lebanese residents have turned to jokes to vent, make sense of the seemingly unintelligible, illustrate the absurdity of the situation, and cope with surplus-emotions in an effort to carry on despite the ‘too-muchness’ of living conditions.

In these jokes, Lebanon is often depicted as falling outside the framework of capitalist modernity — the “actual” spatio-temporal reality of today. The image above is part of a larger corpus of jokes that depict the Lebanese crisis as a “time warp.” Central to the joke is the backwardness of Lebanon’s situation. It depicts Lebanon as being hoisted off the linear historical

timeline. The country's conditions are so pathological, the joke tells us, that they are in clear contradistinction with capitalist modernity. In fact, the break is so severe that Lebanon poses a problem for periodization. Lebanon becomes a crisis *for* history. The joke is explicit in telling its reader that the loss of elements of modern life signals that the country is not part of present-day modernity. It proposes that loss and lack are distinctly anti-capitalist phenomena and that Lebanon's problem does not stem from neoliberal policies and the "businessification" of politics but from a failure in properly applying the tenets of capitalist modernity.

This joke among others, demonstrates the importance of attending to the concept of historical repetition. Karl Marx, Kojin Karatani, Immanuel Wallerstein, Hegel, David Harvey and others, have examined the importance of repetition as a structure of capitalist reproduction. In their analyses, they argue that capitalism reproduces itself because of its internal contradictions. Its cycles are made-up of two primary components: the economic and the political. While the two cannot be studied in strict isolation from one another, they do form contradictory structures that allow for the perpetuation of capitalism. However, the cycles of capitalist reproduction are also made possible by an affective structure. Others have turned to anxiety as the modern affect par excellence, Freud, Lacan and their followers highlighted the importance of the unconscious and the affective structures of subjectivity in capitalist modernity. I, too, started thinking about anxiety as a fundamental pillar of our present historical moment of neoliberal capitalism. What better affect would exemplify the internal torment and *malaise* that arises from living in crisis-ridden modern societies? But looking closely at the case of Lebanon and at the economic and political structures that allow historical cycles to repeat, I want to propose anxious nostalgia as one of the affective structures that allow the reproduction of capitalism. Nostalgia encompasses anxiety, fear, despair, hope, and escapism. It can be a

treacherous affect that relies on memory and its selective nature. A full understanding of historical repetition must be examined by attending to capitalist reproduction.

Jokes, laughter, and humor have been a subject of interest for political theorists since before the Greeks. Why do we joke? What is the function that jokes play? And what does it mean for a joke to land well and provoke laughter? In what way is humor political? My research reflects on these questions by using empirical evidence from the jokes that have circulated and continue to make rounds during the Lebanese revolution. For the purposes of my research, I've collected over a thousand jokes to try to understand why the Lebanese people were resorting to jokes during times of extreme crisis. I began to wonder if jokes can be useful to an understanding of the political situation in Lebanon and started to question whether attention to the usual signifiers of politics was enough for a proper understanding of a particularly dark moment in Lebanese history. At the same time, I found that the almost instantaneous rate at which jokes were produced and disseminated during a particular political juncture was important to note. The temporal aspect, as well as the diagnostic content of jokes signaled the importance of paying attention to alternative modes of communication in times of crisis. In reading those who have theorized jokes, humor, and laughter, I found that oftentimes, social and political theory understand them as a release mechanism. They are understood to aid in coping, in making sense of the unintelligible, and are sometimes even viewed in a negative light: as a tool to reinscribe hegemonic ideology. Instead, I argue that jokes reveal and even challenge the operating assumptions about politics at a particularly crucial juncture. They also rid politics from its individualizing discourse and render struggles communal if not universal in some way. At the same time, I show that jokes are diagnostic. They bring attention to what is most important to those who create, disseminate, and engage with them. They reveal aspects of the collective

psyche that would otherwise be difficult to access. Indeed, jokes oftentimes reveal the contradictory nature of politics in neoliberal times and point to things that our sensibilities might have picked-up on but refused to express aloud.

I'm going to turn to another joke, a screenshot that has circulated on Lebanese social media featuring a Tweet by President Donald J. Trump and a subsequent response by someone who refers to themselves as "Serah Nai." The Tweet reads: "USA! USA! USA!" In response to the Tweet, Serah Nai wrote "Shia Shia Shia !!!!!" It is difficult to tell whether or not Serah's engagement with Trump's Tweet is meant as a joke, as critique or parallelism, or as a serious endorsement of the politics of Trump's Tweet. For our purposes, I am going to assume that Serah's response encompasses an element of irony, critique, and serious engagement. The tweet itself is funny because the USA has policies that criminalize Shia countries, and Shia people. Hezbollah, one of the major Lebanese political players, is subject to US sanctions and deemed a terrorist group. Iran, the most prolific Shia country in the world and one of the major allies of Hezbollah, is considered a crucial ally to Shias and Shia groups in the world but a nuisance to American foreign policy and to Trump supporters more specifically. The juxtaposition between the two is as much emblematic of a split or doubling as it is of a rapprochement, or parallelism. Indeed, the two objects are different in that one is a country, and the other, a sect. At the same time, the two are emblematic of nationalist sentiment and tribal behavior. They are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, they both represent a conservative, right-wing, tribal populism that is at once rooted in a particular religious interpretation of sacred texts and a cultish understanding of politics. The contradictions of politics in neoliberal times are evident in Trump's tweet and in Serah's response. This is one of many examples that I explore in my research to showcase the importance of turning to jokes and memes and in taking them seriously as not only windows into

the political unconscious but as proper tools for the understanding of politics in particularly grim times.

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