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Bassem Chit and Revolutionary Socialism in Lebanon

Sune Haugbolle

This article discusses the Lebanese activist and writer Bassem Chit as an example of the intellectual rebel in Lebanon and the Arab world. It analyses the ideological tradition of revolutionary socialism and the Arab left. Through an analysis of interviews and articles, Haugbolle attempts to locate the place and nature of intellectual production in the organisation of revolutionary activity, and the particular role rebel intellectuals play in bringing about social change. It



Figure 1 : Turkey Agenda. "Interview with the Late Bassem Chit on Politics and and Culture in Lebanon and the Middle East." www.turkeyagenda.com Web. 16. Oct. 2014

draws on the sociology of intellectuals, in particular Gramsci, in the analysis of Bassam Chit's work and his post mortem veneration.

Keywords: Socialism; Arab Left; Intellectual History

During the 2015 social protests against Lebanon's political elite, I have often read on Facebook threads laments such as, "what would Bassem have said?" and "we

miss your voice, Bassem." They refer to Bassem Chit, the Lebanese revolutionary socialist, writer and activist who died from a heart attack on October 1, 2014. For a limited circle of Lebanese, Arab and international revolutionary socialists, Bassem Chit is a rebel martyr, whose life and work continue to inspire. He died at the tender age of 34 after a life devoted to renewing Marxism and revolutionary socialism. His friends and comrades now miss his voice and his sharp analysis more than ever, at a

time when they feel that a chink in the armour of the social system in Lebanon may have opened. They also miss his company and particularly his presence in the protests and in the organisation of the *ḥirāk* (“movement”).

The life and death of Bassem Chit accentuate the challenges of organising dissent and formulating alternative ideological directions, which have come to the fore in Lebanon’s trash protests. In this brief article, I discuss Bassem Chit as an example of the intellectual rebel in Lebanon and the Arab world. I analyse the ideological tradition of revolutionary socialism and the tradition of the Arab left in which his work inscribes itself. I am interested in understanding the place and nature of intellectual production in the organisation of revolutionary activity, and the particular role rebel intellectuals play in bringing about social change. I draw on sociology of intellectuals, in particular Gramsci, in my analysis of Bassem Chit’s work and the veneration of him postmortem.

In order to place myself firmly in this analysis, I should make it clear that I was a friend of Bassem’s. In 2012 and 2013 I recorded several interviews with him in Beirut, which I use here in addition to his writings to place him in the leftist land-

scape of thought and action. Finally, I analyse his significance for Lebanese, Arab and international revolutionary socialism through a reading of obituaries as well as the fifth issue of the journal he helped founding, *al-thawra al-dā’ima*, which is dedicated to his memory.

Rebel Intellectuals and Arab Marxism

The “rebel intellectual” is somewhat of a tautology, as many sociologists see intellectuals as inherently rebellious agents of social change in the modern era. Moreover, many intellectuals themselves define rebellious change as their credo. The intellectual, Vaclav Havel (167) has written,

should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be a witness to their mendacity.

An intellectual who is not rebellious isn’t a true intellectual. This ideal certainly excludes many self-styled intellectuals, who uphold the powers that be. It also runs counter to Gramsci’s (97n) broad definition of an intellectual as “the entire social stratum, which exercises an organisational function in the wide sense – whether in the field of production, or in

that of culture, or in that of political administration.” Conversely, Havel’s definition would seem to celebrate the critical intellectual who writes against the grain and speaks, as Edward Said would have it, truth to power. Power, of course, can be located not just in the State but in all hegemonic structures, including institutions that pride themselves on being anti-hegemonic, such as the Eastern European communist parties, which Havel had in mind when he wrote his text in 1986, or the self-styled *mumāna’a* (“rejectionism”) of the Syrian regime today. For the same reason, Karl Mannheim thought that critical intellectuals together must form a free-floating intelligentsia, a relatively classless stratum of thinkers, able to see beyond the ideological blinders imposed by the left and the right, and thus uphold a democratic, critical conversation.

Bassem Chit was rooted in a different intellectual tradition, that of international and Arab Marxism. The Lebanese Marxists that he read and knew generally hold dear the Gramscian ideal of the organic intellectual, the *ibn al-balad* (‘son of the soil’) who speaks for the subjugated classes. According to Gramsci (5), every social group creates organically ‘one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in

the social and political fields.' The trouble in the Middle East is that in reality, very few of the coryphées of, for example, Lebanese Marxism, including the founders of the Lebanese Communist Party, have hailed from a working-class or peasant-class background. Despite their middle-class pedigree (or perhaps because of it), they hold on to the idea that they represent the perspective of the poor and the needy. Therefore, instead of taking their claims to organic status at face value, we must locate intellectuals in their social setting. In order to do that, grand theory must be complemented by careful, local histories. As Gramsci (18-20) himself was well aware, intellectuals serve different functions in different political economies and cultural contexts. The nature of hegemony must be located before a successful analysis of intellectuals can be made. In this article, I seek to do so by outlining the intellectual tradition and the social milieu that Bassem was a product of and in which he inscribed his work.

Bassem certainly loved Gramsci, but not as much as he loved—and had read—Marx. He would pepper his speech and writings with citations from Marx, and he was well versed in the Arab Marxist tradition. This tradition arguably stretches back to the debate between Islamic reformers and so-called materialists in the Nahda period

(Rodinson 337-48; Tibi 7-17). Historical materialism laid the ground for socialist visions of development and independence. Within the larger spectrum of socialism, which also included Salama Musa's Fabianism, Arab Marxism was from the beginning a strictly intellectual tradition of writers and publishers who became enthralled with the Bolshevik revolution and in the early 1920s established communist parties in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan, Iraq and Palestine. The path of revolution in the age of the Comintern was set and defined by the rigours of Marxist-Leninist dogma as imposed by Stalin, as the Arab communist peers discovered when they became enrolled in training and ideological regimentation. For decades, the overall ideological and political authority of the Soviet Communist Party meant that Arab communists struggled to develop the Marxist system of thought into a flexible methodology that might help them understand the realities and differing conditions of their own countries (Sharif).

In reaction to Stalinism and the domination of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon by Khaled Bakdash, a group of Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian intellectuals inspired by the British 'new left' of the late 1950s wrote critically against the party, against Moscow, and against the Arab

socialism of Nasser and the Baath Party. This group included people who were influenced by Trotsky and the so-called Fourth International. Traces of Trotskysm can be found in the work of Yassin Hafez, George Tarabishi and others who clustered around the group Arab Socialism in the early 1960s, which later developed into what Tareq Ismael, writing in 1976, called a New Arab Left (Ismael). This current is the intellectual foundation on which Bassem Chit built his own commitment. It also provided the methodological and organisational inspiration for his re-reading of the revolutionary situation in Lebanon and the Arab world after 2011.

Importantly, the New Left was not just an intellectual current but also a political current, albeit far from a unified one. Despite their different strategic approaches to the Palestinian issue, and different accents of Marxism, they shared a sentiment that it was necessary to break with the past leadership of Arab regimes. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the formation of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) in Palestine, the Communist Party-Political Bureau in Syria, and the Organisation for Communist Action in Lebanon. The Arab Marxist tradition—at least in the Levant—is strongly influenced by the political affiliation of

many writers with these groups, and their political and military struggles in the Lebanese civil war, the Palestinian freedom struggle, and the confrontation with the Syrian state. This embattled recent history has certainly lent credence to the image of the intellectual as a rebel. For the New Arab Left, Marxism was for a time being practiced gun-in-hand.

After the end of the Lebanese civil war, the ideological project of Marxism was in a global crisis as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, confounded in Lebanon by the defeat of the National Movement in the civil war. This led to intense soul-searching in Marxist milieus in Lebanon as well as other Arab countries. While some maintained a dogmatic Marxism (mostly represented by currents around the Lebanese Communist Party), many drifted towards liberal positions. Faleh Jaber (1997) has termed this new landscape post-Marxism, meaning social theory that draws on the broad family of Marxist thought but goes beyond Marxist dogmas. Some post-Marxists dismiss the claim that Marxism is an infallible scientific theory, and some have moved on to theoretical pluralism. Thus, some post-Marxists maintain class analysis, while others only apply selected elements of the Marxian heritage. In an Arab context, moving on to theoretical pluralism after the end of

the Cold War meant critiquing the lack of internal democracy in Arab communism, and accommodation with liberalism. This accommodation also had the practical implication that by the mid-1990s a significant proportion of Arab Marxists left their party and had become free-floating intellectuals (Sing).

Left Melancholia

The soul-searching post-Marxists that Jaber and other scholars like Manfred Sing (2015) and Suzanne Kassab (2009) discuss largely belong to the generation of thinkers and activists born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Bassem Chit's generation of Marxists have grown up with a different outlook. They are at once more globalized and more confused than the previous generation, whose struggle was firmly rooted in the great questions of liberation and modernization, national independence and structural improvement of living conditions of the poor. This struggle ended in defeat, manifested by neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the breakdown of Arab unity. On the level of social mobilization, Arab Marxists lost momentum to Islamist groups, which was mirrored on the philosophical level by the primacy that Arab Marxists put, from the 1980s onwards, on the notion of *'aṣāla* ("cultural rootedness") as opposed to

international class identity (Browsers). As Bassem told me, this experience of double or triple defeat "came with the genes" for those who grew up in the 1990s. Their parents' generation had run up against external enemies and had been divided by internal splits, leaving them with severe ideological confusion and no immediate sense of direction. It was clear to Bassem and his leftist peers, therefore, that they had to struggle, both in order to assert their influence on the national political and social scene, and to fight what Jody Dean has called the global 'left melancholia' that followed from 1989 (Dean).

Dean's argument, in short, is that the exhaustion of global Marxism was emotional, physical and generational, but also a more temporary phenomenon than it seemed in the 1990s. The much-trumpeted triumph of liberalism had been premature, in other words. The new revolutions and mobilization of the 2010s combined with the effects of the 2008 global economic crisis have engendered a revival of communist organisation and Marxist theory. Left melancholia, for Dean, was not just the result of triumphant ideas and actors opposing socialism and Marxism, but just as much the outcome of the way in which socialists adopted single-issue politics and identity politics, which abandoned the vision of total social trans-

formation. The strength of the 'new new left' of the 2010s is that it embraces multiplicity (and aspects of liberalism), but ties them together in a socialist vision for change. Bassem shared this view and this optimism, but was also, at the time of his death, becoming overwhelmed with fear that the counter-revolution unleashed by revolutionary fervor in the Arab Uprisings threatened to destroy the social fabric of Arab countries. He struggled with bouts of exhaustion and melancholia, the combination of which probably eventually killed him. But he also stressed that the purported 'failure of the left' was not simply a failure of socialist ideas and Marxist theory, but resulted from tactical mistakes made by certain people. In his final interview, given just weeks before he died, he underlined the need for an end to what Fawwaz Traboulsi (Revolution) has called "the lacerating self-criticism" of the left. The uprisings, Bassem (and Trabloulsi) believed, provided an opportunity to realize that

History doesn't make mistakes, it just happens. There have been loads of mistakes in the traditional left. But saying that the new revolutionary left could have organized the working class, to organize itself in the past twenty years, this is absurdity. In the

last twenty years, we are talking about a revolutionary left rising in different countries, in Egypt, in Lebanon, and these groups are effective in a small degree but still more effective than traditional left organizations. So it's a very important development.¹

The 'new new left'

Bassem came to this conviction, that the renewal of Arab socialism was possible from the bottom-up, through his own personal trajectory. Like all intellectuals Bassem Chit was shaped by the concerns of the recent past as much as by the present. Born in 1979, he was part of the "war generation," who witnessed the Lebanese civil war as children and came of age with debates about post-war reconstruction in the 1990s. On Lebanon's university campuses in the mid-1990s, leftist organisations such as *bi-lā ḥudūd* ("No Frontiers", AUB), Pablo Neruda (LAU), *al-'amal al-mubāshar* ("Direct Action", Balamand), and Tanios Chahine (USJ), provided spaces for rethinking leftist engagement in an age dominated by the neoliberal policies of the Hariri governments. It involved, as one of its participants remembers, 'un mélange de sociaux-démocrates, de militants laics ["*secularists*"], d'écologistes, d'internationalistes, de nationalistes arabes, de marxistes, de trotskistes, et de

militants des droits de l'homme.' (Abi Yaghi 41). Seeking to bypass the bureaucratic language and institutions of their older communist peers, this budding 'new new left' worked in networks rather than parties, and preferred public action over engagement with official institutions of the state, which they viewed as corrupt.

At the beginning of the 2000s, this 'new new left' increasingly transformed their student engagement and intellectual debates into activism. Bassem became part of this motley crew of new leftists who protested the WTO meeting in Doha in 2001, organised anti-war demonstrations against US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, published journals such as *al-yasārī* ("the leftist") and organised activism on many different levels. He was thus an integral figure in the creation of the Socialist Forum (*al-muntada al-ishtirākī*) in 2010, its journal *al-manshour*, and from 2012 the journal *al-thawra al-dā'ima* ("The Permanent Revolution"), which revolved, and still revolves, around a network of revolutionary socialist groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco.

Al-thawra al-dā'ima contains Chit's most elaborate intellectual production, not just his own articles but also his editorship and his efforts to create a network for the renewal of revolutionary socialism in the region. He wrote insightfully about racism,

the Syrian refugee question, and particularly nationalism and sectarianism. Drawing on Ussama Makdisi's seminal work on the modern roots of the sectarian system, Chit believed that sectarianism is a product of capitalist relations in Lebanon. He believed that the sectarian system was linked to hegemony of the ruling class established under imperialism and perpetuated by the liberal institutions of the state. In this way, he took Makdisi's constructivist argument further by stressing the internal contradictions in the capitalist system and the class structure of Lebanon (Chit 2009, 2014). From a scholarly point of view there is nothing novel in this argument. It has been elaborated based on original research by other historical materialists such as Fawwaz Traboulsi, Carolyn Gates, and Salim Nasr. But then, Bassem Chit was not primarily a scholar. For him, the important task was to understand the conditions of Arab societies and devise a plan for revolutionary change. He insisted on a class analysis of Lebanese politics and society, because he believed that a clear, historically founded analysis of the complex structures of Lebanese society was a necessary starting point for the inculcation of revolutionary consciousness. In doing so, he placed himself in a long tradition of critiquing sectarianism

and linking social justice to the formation of a secular political order (Haugbolle).

A Nineteenth-Century Rebel in the Twenty-First Century

Bassem's writings and manner of speech were deeply influenced by Marx and Trotsky. Talking to Bassem could sometimes feel like talking to a nineteenth-century revolutionary in London, ready to organize and theorise all the way to kingdom come. He earned the respect of fellow revolutionaries from his willingness to engage in conversation and debate with all sorts of people, from refugees in methodological workshops that he organised in some of Beirut's poorest neighborhoods, to Lebanese and foreign academics. In all of this, he stuck to his belief in the necessity of revolutionary change.

Just like the first socialists in the mid-nineteenth century, Arab revolutionary socialists today depend on solidarity and comradeship in order to maintain the momentum of their project to change the social order against all odds. Therefore, Bassem was very aware of the need to unify the ideological line in the Marxist-socialist milieu. At the time of his death, deep splits had occurred that existed prior to 2011 but had been accentuated by the uprisings and in particular by the war in Syria. The splits were already visible in

2006, when a group of leftist intellectuals in Lebanon published an open letter denouncing the Democratic Left Movement and the March 14 alliance for their failure to protect and support Hizbullah in its war with Israel. In 2011, some leftists continued to support the Syrian regime in the name of the struggle against Israel and resistance to imperialism, but this position was challenged by the evident and growing violence against civilians. Others stood with the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian National Council and the peaceful uprising, in the name of revolution and the defense of democratic rights. Some supported a middle way between solidarity with the protestors' demands for freedom and rejecting foreign interference, and instead advocated national reconciliation (Dot-Pouillard).

As the Syrian crisis intensified and became an outright war in 2012, the splits on the left in Lebanon and in the region worsened. In May 2013 I asked Bassem to explain how he viewed the chances of a unified left in the region, to which he replied that he thought it was crystalizing, but that the war in Syria showed that unity would necessitate a complete rupture with "the old left," which to him was only a left in name. The old left, for him, meant the Stalinism of many Arab communist parties, and the authoritarian legacy of

Arab socialism in the form of Baathism and Nasserism. Their support for the Syrian regime and for Hizbullah was not surprising, as they put collective struggle before individual freedom, and anti-imperialism—the notion of *mumānaʿa* (“rejectionism”)—before popular mobilization (Traboulsi, *Crisis*). Bassem had great belief in the ability of his generation to distance themselves collectively from the old left in a way that the ‘old new left’ in the 1960s and 1970s perhaps failed to do. The Arab revolutions were to be the tool of this unification, which would lead to a revolutionary culture that could set the Arab countries on the path of regional redistribution of wealth, resistance to foreign interference, and socialist states. For the revolutions to become such as tool, the new left of the 2000s, he believed, had to join forces with the hundreds of thousands of Arabs involved in the revolutions. The aim of *al-thawra al-dāʿima* was to theorize revolution with the people involved in the uprisings. Tracing the birth of a new left, he told me that,

In Lebanon it started in the late 1990s, early 2000s. It started with the movement against the war in Iraq. In 2002, the movement here in Lebanon adopted the slogan “no war, no dictator.” Ironically this is the same position we take today on Syria. We

are against any military intervention, even of Hizbullah, and against dictatorship. This position started in 2002.

Others became involved already around the Palestinian Intifada of 2000-2001. But as Bassem said, “that was an easy question compared to the Iraqi war.”

In the question of Iraq, some of the left, for example what became the Democratic Left Movement, aligned themselves with the imperialists, saying imperialism will bring democracy to Iraq. Our group started off from the position between those who supported Saddam against imperialism and the coalition against tyranny. We came together over this position. And so there was a fragmentation, and that fragmentation has continued... Today [in 2013] the DLM is deteriorating. The Lebanese Communist Party is deteriorating. This is because they have chosen sides. And what we see is that our position—of being in-between, of double-rejection if you want—is gaining more momentum.

The position of double-rejection has proven to be difficult, if not impossible, in the context of continuous civil war as in Syria, or authoritarian military rule as in Egypt, where the revolutionary socialists

have been imprisoned and persecuted since 2013. For Bassem, the rejection was necessary to maintain against all odds. He did not see it merely as a practical position against particular political forces, but equally as the only tenable ideological position for any democratic Arab left worthy of its name. Ideologically, he linked this stance to the rejection of stagist theory, the Marxist theory that underdeveloped countries must first pass through a stage of capitalism before moving to a socialist stage. This necessitates alliances with the national bourgeoisie. What might seem like a detached abstract discussion was in fact the central bone of contention between the Arab nationalist movement and new left Marxists in the 1960s. Thus, Khaled Bakdash, on returning from Moscow in 1951, had suddenly learned the Stalinist line of a stagist approach (Tibi 24). Today, Bassem stressed, Communist parties and other leftist currents maintain stagist theory “as a justification for their support for regimes such as the Syrian.”

And this is the same stagist theory that led the left in Lebanon to be destroyed! That led the left to be destroyed by Nasser in Egypt. By Khomeini in Iran. All over the region. Can you believe it? They are readopting the theory and creating illusions about a certain alli-

ance with the national bourgeoisie. In an era when you have a hugely globalized economy. And the national bourgeoisie is linked to the international bourgeoisie. This is absurd because the line of separation between national and international bourgeoisie, which may have existed in the nationalist era, does not exist anymore. For example, when we look at banking, construction, et cetera, in Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, they are directly linked to international capital. And they are linked to the moneyed ties of Saudi Arabia extending everywhere. This is why we think that it is a destructive theory.

Remembering Bassem

The last time I spoke with Bassem we talked about the sense of living in revolutionary times, where history was replayed as farce—both the deep history of international socialism and that of the Arab left. “It’s like the old ghosts are coming back, the good and the ugly but mostly the ugly,” he said. We talked about how we should all work to improve conditions here and now and build networks of solidarity. We talked about the importance of focusing on local struggles, even if revolution has to be international. Sadly, it was probably his failure to live up to this sound advice—his constant engagement in a mil-

lion things at the same time—that got the better of his heart. Somebody should have said to him, “take it easy, you’re doing too much.” Somebody probably did, but Bassem wouldn’t have listened. He lived the struggle.

The many obituaries published by Lebanese, Arab, and international socialists are a testimony to his impact on this current. He was one of the few people who could coordinate and develop regional branches of revolutionary socialists. In *al-manshour*, his close colleagues from the Socialist Forum wrote that he “dedicated his life to the liberation of humanity from all forms of hegemony, occupation and oppression. With his sudden departure, we lost more than a rare revolutionary activist. We also lost a unique leader with very creative initiatives. It will not be easy at all to fill the huge vacuum of his absence.”² The revolutionary socialists in Egypt asserted that he “was a towering figure on the Arab revolutionary Left” with a

“unique ability to coordinate the issuing of a statement on behalf of revolutionary organizations in different countries and complete all the necessary discussions and corrections in half a day (...) We have lost a tremendous fighting spirit. We have lost a keen revolutionary intelligence. We have lost the theoretical and political contribu-

tions we were expecting from him in the long term.”³

Beyond the region as well, the legacy of Bassem was celebrated and the lost potential mourned. “It’s hard to overstate the political loss the revolutionary left in the Middle East has suffered,” wrote Alex Callinicos in the UK-based *Socialist Worker*. Remembering Bassem as someone who added crucial nuance to international socialists’ understanding of the complexities of the Middle East, Callinicos stressed that a sympathetic “cultural translator” such as Bassem is highly needed for international socialists to make sense of it for them.⁴ Summarising reactions to Bassem’s death, the Moroccan researcher and member of the international group RS21 Miriyam Aouragh further wrote, “we have lost one of the very few principled voices in what is becoming a quagmire.”⁵

The Middle East, the left, and popular mobilization have landed in a quagmire indeed. Perhaps it is worth remembering that for every generation of leftists, the challenges have been huge and the odds stacked against them. The attempt to carve out a path towards socialist change has always necessitated iconic figures, rebel intellectuals, whose words and deeds provided guidance. The most touching indication that Bassem Chit could become such a figurehead for

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activists in the Middle East is the fifth issue of *al-thawra al-dā'ima*, where his peers from around the Arab world, old and young, pay tribute to his thoughts and life. These short texts are often quite poetic and deeply personal, and show the extent to which his death was a collective emotional event, a turning point after which no one was the same. As his friend Walid Daou wrote, Bassem was not quite Christ the Saviour, but his comrades now almost feel like the disciples who must be reminded by the example of the

dead to stand against “the attacks that are being waged today. Will we be able to stand on our feet? The answer is certain, it is that we will not accept anything less than a sweeping revolution to lead us towards the other side.”⁶

Bassem himself formed his ideas in a conversation with all of the living people on these pages and many more, and with his intellectual heroes, as he grew up in the 1990s, staring down left melancholia with his Trotsky, his Mahdi ‘Amil and his Marx in hand. Ideological formation is a

cumulative process, in which the words and deeds of rebels who went before provide guidance for new generations. It was unexpected that Bassem should join their ranks so soon.

Notes

¹ <<http://www.turkeyagenda.com/interview-with-the-late-bassem-chit-on-the-politics-and-culture-in-lebanon-and-the-middle-east-1302.html>>

² <<http://www.al-manshour.org/node/5923>>

³ <<http://global.revsoc.me/2014/10/farewell-bassem-chit-farewell-comrade/>>

⁴ <<https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/39121/>>

⁵ <<http://rs21.org.uk/2014/10/03/bassem-chit/>>

⁶ Walid Daou, “Bāsīm, ka’annak dakhalt fi al-naṣṣ” (“Bassem, as if you entered into the text”). Permanent Revolution 5, 181-83. <<http://permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/node/106>>

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