Review Essay

Memory Politics in Lebanon a Generation after the Civil War

Lucia Volk
San Francisco State University, CA, USA
lvolk@sfsu.edu


Lebanon has not been in the spotlight of news reports from the Middle East lately, with all eyes focused on ongoing wars in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, as well as the intractable Palestine-Israel conflict. We also hear of the increasingly repressive measures taken by post-Arab Spring regimes to consolidate power and control over their populations. Lebanon was not swept up in the wave of popular uprisings that transformed part of the Middle East after 2010. The Lebanese, like the Algerians, had purportedly had enough of violence and protest after a fierce civil war, and did not have the energy or will to mount a challenge to their government, no matter how dysfunctional. So, it was initially surprising to see Hermez’ book about Lebanon titled War is Coming. Based on years of fieldwork, he describes a constant state of ‘anticipation’ that something bad might happen at any moment. He allows us entry into the homes of his family and friends, and shares his recollection of their conversations about daily uncertainties. By
contrast, Saade introduces a notion of uncertainty into the evolution of Hizbullah ideology, based on more than a decade of publications by spokespersons for the party. Both authors provide us with the kind of material anthropologists live for: thick, context-filled descriptions of social realities as they are experienced by real, complex and contradictory human beings. Both books deal with the ongoing relevance of violent pasts, specifically Lebanon’s civil war, since references to that war continue to appear in daily conversations, on billboards and in graffiti, in political pamphlets and in the media. While actual war might not currently afflict any of the interlocutors, they live with the daily expectation of possible future violence, and the recognition of an unsettled past. Neither story can be told in a purely linear fashion, because past, present and future co-exist.

Since the Civil War (1975–1990) ended with a political agreement and subsequent military occupation by the Syrian army, rather than an all-out victory by one side over the other, decision-makers in Lebanon agreed to the formula ‘No victor/No vanquished’, a formula that meant all participants in the civil war would be welcome in the post-war political process. In return for turning in their weapons, militia leaders and fighters obtained amnesty for the crimes they had committed. Hizbullah kept its weapons and received amnesty, because the Syrian-controlled Lebanese state sanctioned its activities as resistance to Israel. Seats in Lebanon’s parliament were redistributed evenly—50/50—after decades of assigning six Christian representatives for every five Muslim representatives. That quota system was at the core of Lebanon’s political paradox: it guaranteed that all ethno-religious groups in Lebanon have a place at the table and feel included, yet the seat distribution did not and does not correspond to the actual number of Lebanese citizens thus represented, a fact that invites deep cynicism among citizens who are not fairly represented and leads to an almost instinctual defensiveness among citizens who are over-represented. To spell it out clearly, historically, Christians have had more seats, proportionally, than Sunni and Shii Muslims. Political elites have steadfastly refused to update the last census (from 1932), as this would reveal actual population figures, or address the issue of whether to count expatriate Lebanese around the world; therefore, citizens of Lebanon are asked to accept a skewed distribution of political representation, as this is the only way all groups agree to work together. We are no strangers to curious political math in the western world, as we have recently seen, more than once, the Electoral College vote differ significantly from the popular vote in US presidential elections. At some point in the past, American political elites negotiated a compromise that stipulated a balance between states’ and federal power, for the greater good and the preservation of the union. Yet, trust in traditional political elites has eroded, and citizens cannot agree on the ‘greater good’ or the shape or color of
the ‘union’. The traditional political process becomes precarious. In Lebanon, we must add to this precariousness other regional conflicts, most prominently the conflict between Israel and Palestine, but also tensions between Iran and Gulf states, and ongoing power struggles between Russia and the United States. All of these international actors have allies of conviction or convenience in Lebanon, which makes it almost impossible to speak of ‘national politics’.

It was much easier to write about social memory during the 1990s, when the prevalent mood among Lebanese was ‘khalasna min al-harb’ (‘we’ve had enough of the war’). People seemed to look forward to what Lebanon could become again—the phoenix rising from the ashes was an oft-cited metaphor. Rather than dwelling on the war, people spoke fondly of how good life used to be before the war, and they projected hope in regaining or even improving that life. Construction sites promised to build a Beirut more beautiful than it used to be (‘kama kaanat wa-ajmal’). Lebanon’s most visible reconstruction project of its destroyed downtown area was centrally managed by a company affiliated with then-prime minister Rafiq Hariri, who envisioned a sanitized, commercial downtown center where people could congregate to eat, drink and shop. You may recall President George W. Bush exhorting Americans to go shopping after 9/11. It is not necessary to repeat the many eloquent critiques of the Hariri-led reconstruction plan, yet it is fair to say that during the 1990s, Lebanon worked hard to regain its standing as a tourism and entertainment capital in the Middle East. While there was a prevailing sense of loss among the majority of the population—everyone could name families who had enriched themselves during the war—there was hope that things would change for the better.

It did not quite work out that way. The assassination of President Hariri in February 2005, the destructive war in July 2006, and politically motivated killings and kidnappings halted the forward momentum. Sami Hermez and Bashir Saade did their fieldwork in Lebanon during the decade after 2005, when Lebanon had descended into despair, in light of a dysfunctional parliament whose members refused to cooperate to form a government (in one short episode in 2008, members of different parties attacked each other with heavy weapons) or elect a president, or even deal with the country’s garbage. No one in parliament was held accountable. Popular protests were summarily ignored. The mood that marked the decade after 2005 was profound uncertainty. The research that Hermez and Saade published creatively and actively engages with the idea of uncertainty as part of the lived, and narrated, lives of private citizens and politicians. Instead of an agreed upon ‘golden’ past, or ‘better future’, that might have featured in conversations in Lebanon in the early 1990s, Lebanese now (re)negotiate meanings of different periods of time, depending on the specific context of or participants in the conversation, and current events.
And as Saade clearly points out at the beginning of his book, just because someone tells you about their perception of reality—past, present, or future—at any given moment, does not mean that they are actually describing reality (Saade 8). The resulting texts might not be easy reading on the Lebanese civil war and post-war life (especially for readers without prior knowledge of Lebanon’s civil war and its many participants), but they are valiant attempts at making contingency and incoherence central points of inquiry. Importantly, they show how leaving room for contradiction and a polyvalent meaning might be a strategy that helps Lebanese navigate their everyday lives as well as their politics.

Hermez takes us home with him, to sit with relatives at his grandmother’s kitchen table. We listen in on conversations among Lebanese Christians of various political parties, who harbor a variety of ideological convictions. The intimacy of the family setting allows for sensitive topics to emerge, but everyone knows what can and cannot be said in order to keep the family peace. Memories of the past are refracted through familial and friendship relations; it clearly matters who is in the room, or even where a social gathering takes place, for certain narratives of the past to emerge or other narratives to remain unspoken. Present-day politics invite comparisons with the past. Ongoing bombings and killings, reported in the news or witnessed firsthand, keep people fearing for the worst. According to Hermez, members of his Lebanese family as well as his friends continually reference their civil war past, rather than trying to ignore or suppress it. Hermez takes particular issue with the now mostly dismissed idea that the Lebanese suffer(ed) from “collective amnesia” after the civil war. The Lebanese, as has been widely shown in post-war scholarship, have written, talked, composed songs and poetry, (spray) painted or photographed, organized panels and symposia, and more about the civil war.

Yet no one has been held accountable for criminal deeds. For that, Hermez blames the policy of ‘No victor/No vanquished’ which, in order to return the war-torn country to a post-war political process that sought to include everyone, forgave those who had killed, coerced and destroyed. He deplores the absence of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would have addressed war crimes, and would have made amnesty dependent on public recognition of victims affected by crimes. For Hermez, that process would have allowed Lebanese to leave the war behind, rather than continue to evoke and expect violence in their post-civil war lives. Many Lebanese, and scholars of Lebanon, have debated if a Truth and Reconciliation Commission would have worked in Lebanon—many doubt it truly worked in South Africa, where it was most prominently applied. Can genuine admissions of guilt and requests for forgiveness be publicly performed? Not all readers will agree that ‘No victor/No
vanquished’ is to blame for Lebanon’s ongoing struggles, but they will agree that the country is defined by anxious expectation. So how can the current political system be meaningfully reformed? Especially given that the justice system does not operate as it should, and crimes routinely go unpunished. This is the main challenge members of Lebanon’s post-war generation must tackle.

Saade’s detailed book focuses on the public production of the ideological platform of Hizbullah, an organization that pursues political, military and social agendas in Lebanon. Hizbullah thinkers and writers resort to the past to give meaning to the present, but they do this in often contradictory or ambiguous ways. Hizbullah’s ideology borrows significantly from Iran’s revolution, which came with a reinterpretation of Shi’i history, and in particular, the role of the martyrs as those who stand up for religious principles, even in the face of certain death. Past, present and future collapse in the figure of the martyr, as accounts of fighters from the first and second centuries of the Islamic era become templates for contemporary resistance fighters, who anticipate future victory over Israeli forces on Lebanese soil—and ultimately the liberation of Jerusalem. The remembrance of martyrs ‘is the cornerstone of the cultural production of Hizbullah that not only builds ideological coherence but is also conducive to effective social mobilization and militant action’ (Saade 41).

In other words, like Hermez found among his interlocutors, memory of past violence produces and gives meaning to violence in the present and continues to project it into the future.

Hizbullah dedicates significant resources and time to the commemoration of individual martyrs of the present-day resistance, including suicide attackers, they thereby fuse historical and religious narratives, theological treatises, and their own interpretations of the root causes of Lebanon’s political dysfunction into an ideology that must be convincing, yet at the same time ambiguous, so as to include the maximum number of Lebanese from across the ethno-religious spectrum. An example is the simultaneous attack on Political Maronitism, a nationalist Christian ideology espoused by the Kataeb Party, and the embrace of suffering Christian Lebanese who need to be liberated from the colonial project of some of their own leaders. By defining a heroic Lebanese citizen as anyone who resists—rather than collaborates with—Israel and the West, Hizbullah aims to transcend ethno-religious divides, while at the same time remaining steeped in Shi’i identity politics. Contradiction and ambiguity across various Hizbullah publications, which Saade meticulously analyzes, show how Hizbullah attempts to do various things simultaneously, such as institutionalizing an ideology via the use of written templates, while yet giving individual Hizbullah leaders their own platform to express their views. In 1985, Hizbullah published their objectives in the ‘Open Letter to the Downtrodden’, which
included bringing down the Lebanese government—seen to be doing the bidding of Israel and the United States. In 1992, they revisited that objective, since they agreed to join elections and take seats in the post-war government. Those critical of Hizbullah claim that it does the bidding of Iran, and therefore has no (more) legitimacy as a national actor on Lebanon’s political stage than other parties do. Yet no one can argue with the fact that more Hizbullah fighters have died in military operations with Israel, or in the ongoing Syrian civil war, than members of any other group. This is why the history of past and the ongoing commemoration of contemporary martyrs plays such a crucial role in Hizbullah’s writings.

As we can glean from some of Hermez’ family’s interactions, among Lebanese Christians, Lebanese Shia are still stereotyped as backward and less cultured individuals (Hermez, chapter 7). Saade describes Shia stereotypes of Maronite Christians as people ‘of crusader origins, western oriented, and Israeli in [their] ambitions’ (Hermez 69). Hermez’s ethnographic opening in his book is a bar brawl between different Lebanese Christians defending the honor of their respective political groups, as well as their own personal honor. The fault lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that Lebanon’s civil war(s) created have become realities, and it is ‘inevitable for people to identify themselves and others along sect lines’ (Hermez 28). While neither Saade nor Hermez make sectarianism a key feature of investigation, both books speak volumes about how sectarian identities are continually constructed and practiced in everyday life, as well as in political manifestos. We know that these identities are constructs, and therefore can be recast in new ways or dismantled. But for that to be imagined or possible, it is necessary to undertake a critical analysis of how various Lebanese groups and individuals refer to the past—what exactly is remembered vs. what is not. In other words, the politics of memory remains as salient a line of inquiry as ever in Lebanon.

Efforts by civil society actors and institutions dedicated to preserving and debating memories of war are invaluable, as are the analytical efforts of social scientists with outsider perspectives. Researchers can make important contributions to ongoing dialogues about Lebanon’s past, present and future by looking at memories as both symbols and acts that create new realities and determine futures.