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PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES: DISCOVERING FREEDOM IN A REFUGEE CAMP*

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At the start of the 1970s, we all read *Mourir d'aimer* [Dying for Love], a novel written by a Frenchman whose name still sticks in my memory: Pierre Duchesne. Using "we" to speak about this reading describes the reality better than "I," since reading was a communal activity forced on us by the fact that books were very expensive—at least for senior pupils living in a Gaza refugee camp, and also because we took turns reading books. Talking about books was one of the most precious of pleasures and—done crowded against the walls of houses in semi-dark streets during long evenings—one of the most exciting.

This novel impressed us so much that some of us still remember it. There are various reasons for this: First, it was a novel about love—and when you are sixteen, raging hormones electrify that word, cutting you to the quick as soon as you feel this emotion or talk about it. Secondly, this novel was concerned with an "unnatural" relationship between a female teacher and one of her pupils who, as luck would have it, was the same age as we were. Of course, we identified with this fortunate beloved, despite his sad fate (he and his teacher kill themselves in the end). Perhaps that fate drove us to dream of a similar, and even greater, experience of seduction. The third reason was that the novel was set against the background of the 1968 student uprising in France.

A right to our own values

We had heard and read about the demonstrations that erupted in the French capital and then spread to other European cities, but *Mourir d'aimer* was the best and simplest opportunity for both grasping the significance of the student rebellion and discovering a connection (whatever that might have been) between us and the uprising. The love between a teacher and her pupil challenged the social rules that determine individual behavior and lay down the conditions for belonging to society.

When the two lovers decide to kill themselves in response to a society striving to protect a degenerate morality from disgrace, their action really does arise out of the individual's freedom to reject

dominant values. They assume the individual's right to adopt one's own values and moral standards out of free will and act out the desire to discover and try out something new rather than adhere to imitation and instruction.

Decline of paternal authority

Our enthusiasm for speaking about freedom and values certainly cannot be interpreted abstractly, and if we attributed excessive importance to this, it surely did not come from any cultural sensitivity. The truth is that when the Israelis defeated the Arabs in the Six-Day War of June 1967, a year before the student revolt, we came to admire any criticism of traditional values and discussion of moving beyond them.

One of many attempts to explain the defeat included the idea of a decline in paternal authority, which most immediately affected us. Paternal authority did not refer to paternity in a narrow and direct sense of the word but rather to society as an extended father endowed with all possible powers. It was this society—with its ideas about morality, its social structure, its hypocrisy, and its carelessness—that had caused and suffered the defeat.

Finding words for the rebellion

At that time, *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, a book by Syrian-born Sadiq Jalal al-Azm published soon after the end of the 1967 war, enriched our thinking with valuable ideas. Al-Azm wrote about "slick operators," people who are superficial, deceitful, and lacking in morality and culture—qualities necessary for success in diverse societies. They could be politicians, intellectuals, soldiers, administrators, or presidents, and it was they, he wrote, who had led the Arab world to defeat.

These reflections imparted credibility to our ideas and enabled us to adhere to views perhaps inappropriate to our age, but we had an empathy with them and understood them in an instinctive and profound way. These texts gave us the words to justify our rebellion and to familiarize ourselves with our true opponents.

Connection to the international community

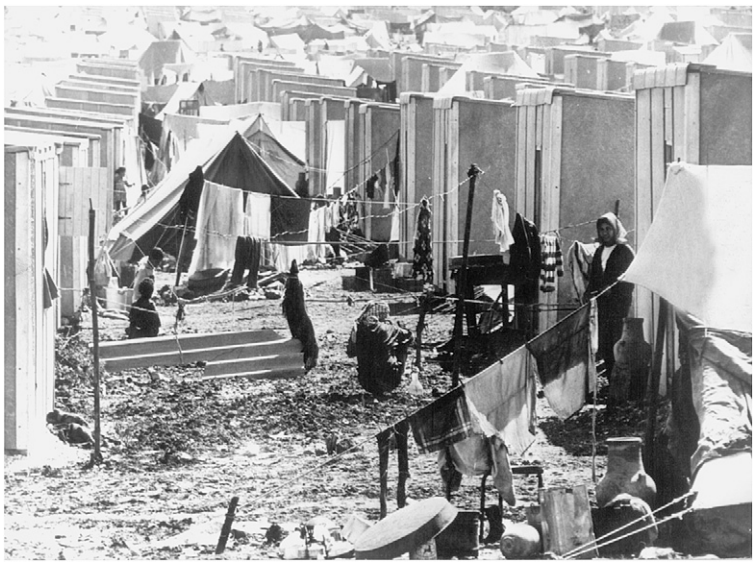
In this spirit, our enthusiasm for anything that called prevalent values into question, even if it occurred in a distant country and was embodied in a relationship ending in death, was not just a cultural

response. It was also our way of taking part in an international movement that, though lacking clear-cut characteristics, spanned large parts of the world.

Among the books we passed around at the end of the '60s were remnants from a library plundered during the war. One of them was entitled *A Dictionary of Communism*, published by a Beirut company, which, I learned later, comprised part of a US project designed to combat the dissemination of leftist ideas in the Arab world. The compilers of this dictionary, who even wanted to discourage people from using terms like "the Left," concentrated on the dangers morality and society faced when destructive ideas spread. Despite these warnings, or maybe because of them, we became leftists even before we had read the final pages of the dictionary. After all, the Left, as described in the book, promised to change morality and society.

Ban on long hair

As many of us found expression by means other than words, long hair, tight clothing, and particularly bell-bottom pants became a kind of territory under dispute between ourselves and society, represented by school, people's gaze in the streets, and sometimes also the family. In high school, we were punished if we allowed our hair to grow long, or wore colorful shirts and bell-bottoms. Some kids were skillful and wore two shirts and two pairs of pants simultaneously, but no solution could be found for long hair. At least until our schooldays came to an end, this remained one of those forbidden things that could not be concealed.



Palestinian refugee camp near Amman, Jordan, in March 1969.

Returning to the past is akin to visiting an old house we once lived in, and which we believed we knew everything about. But when we visit this place, we always discover a

corner we never saw before. For example, it is remarkable to recall high school pupils forty years ago spending long evenings in the semi-dark streets of a refugee camp discussing freedom and invoking such names as Sartre, Marcuse, and Simone de Beauvoir. We were busy with the struggle against colonialism and imperialism wherever that occurred—as if that were a personal or almost a family affair that had to be dealt with immediately.

Great change in small worlds

Some years ago, I met an Israeli who was a member of Matzpen (the Israeli Socialist Organization), who told me about growing up at the end of the '60s. Surprisingly, he and his cohorts, about the same age as I was, were interested in the same books and individuals, and had the same dreams—just in another language, of course. It is not difficult to imagine innumerable students in different places across the world who did likewise and believed that an uprising against real or imagined fathers should not be delayed.

The widespread nature of revolutionary thinking at that time prods us to make comparisons between generations, or talk about the world of high school students today. Yet I have no particular inclination to do so. One can only say that those who can be called the '60s generation in our country brought great change to their little worlds. Perhaps they even achieved at least symbolic success in overthrowing real and imagined fathers. However, today it is indisputable that this success was short-lived.

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