

Book Review: Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation by Fadi A. Bardawil

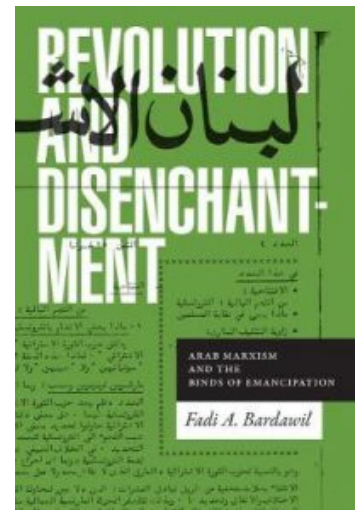
In Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation, Fadi A. Bardawil uncovers the archives of the Marxist Lebanese Left from the 1950s to the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, taking this history of revolutionary thought as a premise to explore the relation between theory and practice, the making of intellectuals and the role of historical context in shaping theoretical urgencies and legacies. Challenging the positioning of Marxism as a Western theory through its engagement with Lebanese leftist intellectuals' contribution to revolutionary praxis, this is a profoundly interdisciplinary study that shows how thinkers and the theories they make are never abstracted from the many spaces they inhabit, writes Myriam Amri.

Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation. Fadi A. Bardawil. Duke University Press. 2020.

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In [Revolution & Disenchantment](#), Fadi A. Bardawil uncovers the archives of the Marxist Lebanese Left from the 1950s to the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. By sketching the intellectual history of revolutionary thought, the book takes this archive as a premise to ask: what is a theory, who are its intellectuals and how can we imagine theory from the Middle East?

Revolution and Disenchantment is a different kind of academic book, profoundly interdisciplinary as it weaves together the crux of postcolonial studies, intellectual history, political theory and anthropological inquiries. Its interdisciplinarity is, in a sense, essential for the project that historical anthropologist Bardawil sets out to undertake. The book aims to pry open questions on the nature of theory, a quest that too often academics in the social sciences shy away from. In *Revolution and Disenchantment*, theory, and more precisely revolutionary theory, is a site from which to locate the relation between theory and practice, the role of the historical context in shaping theoretical urgencies, the making of intellectuals and, finally, the legacies that endure and those that turn into disenchanting projects.



To attend to theory as his object of study, the author coins the notion of 'fieldwork in theory' as a method to locate 'not only how theory helps us understand the world but also what kind of work it does in it: how it seduces intellectuals, contributes to the cultivation of their ethos and sensibilities, and authorizes political practices for militants' (8). The notion of 'fieldwork in theory' helps us see how concepts and ideas, especially ones that have become naturalised, can be unsettled. What does it mean to view theory as an object of study in and of itself?

To unpack the work a theory can do, the book follows the Lebanese New Left and the generation of revolutionary intellectuals who gathered under the organisation of the Marxist group Socialist Lebanon in the mid-1960s. The book chapters weave the works and lives of seminal thinkers like Waddah Charara, Fawwaz Traboulsi and Abbas Beydoun in their intellectual journeys in and out of Marxism. The book traces their youth, their coming into revolutionary theory, their different approaches to Marxism, their attempts to put it into praxis through texts and organising until the moment when their revolutionary ethos breaks apart. In doing so, the author asks us to question our assumptions regarding Marxist thought as a Western theory that merely travels to spaces outside the West. Instead, he shows how Marxist theory is very much a hybrid between the canon Lebanese thinkers come to embrace and their own political and social contexts.



The book is divided into two main parts. The first part, 'The Time of History' in Chapters One, Two and Three lays out the context of the emergence of the Lebanese New Left by locating the historical background of these ideas in the 1950s. The author moves away from accounts of Lebanon before the civil war, which too often concern themselves with the rise of sectarianism without accounting for the breadth of political ideas that marked this era.

Chapter Three is central to the book because it narrows [the focus on 1967](#). For much of Arab thought and history, 1967 is a key turning point as it marks the defeat of Arab armies and the emergence of a tradition of self-critique that views the region's decline as inevitable. Yet Bardawil complicates the binary between the rise and decline of the region and considers how the conditions of the defeat and the emerging critiques from intellectuals preceded 1967. He asks for whom is 1967 a turning point, and he shows how for intellectuals in the diaspora like Edward Said, 1967 indeed became a moment of radicalisation much more than it was for intellectuals at home.

The second part of the book, 'Times of the Sociocultural', focuses on the progressive disenchantment of Lebanese leftist intellectuals regarding the possibility of revolution in times of increasing sectarianism in Lebanon. The final blow to this period of disillusion comes with the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, which is where Bardawil leaves us. In bringing together the making of revolutionary thought and its progressive fragmentation, Bardawil contemplates the questions of what makes a theory emerge at a particular moment, what allows it to become hegemonic and, finally, how does it collapse?

The author reads the archive of Socialist Lebanon together with the lengthy life histories of its key members. The book is not trying to produce a history of the Lebanese New Left but rather attempts to bring together the triad of theory, political practice and the figure of the intellectual. Moreover, throughout the book, Bardawil sets a comparison between Lebanese leftist thought and postcolonial theory. He positions the Marxist Lebanese in contrast with influential Arab thinkers like Said or Sadiq al-Azm in order to investigate the role of the intellectual and how intellectuals at home are differentially entangled with those in the diaspora. Through these points of comparison, the book fundamentally refuses the lingering divide that exists between spaces of theory located in the West and the spaces of practice as that of the non-West. He shows how, even in times when postmodernism and postcolonialism have revealed how knowledge functions through colonial categories, this binary still lingers, especially as it pertains to the Middle East. In other words, Bardawil asks us to ponder the locatedness of theory, how certain spaces are seen as drivers of it, while others are relegated to mere sites of application.

By following the intimate trajectories of Lebanese leftist thinkers, the book shows how intellectuals and the theories they make are never abstracted from the many spaces they inhabit. The Lebanese intellectuals in Bardawil's book are individuals occupying multiple class and historical positions. Yet in the messy entanglements of their lives and works, the book helps break apart the neat divide between the Western thinker and the native one to show how intellectuals and the theories they produce move through spaces, gather ideas from different locations and texts, always occupy uneasy positions and can be subjects of history themselves.

In setting a structure that refuses to be contained solely in a geographical location and a narrow historical time and through expansive links between theories and intellectuals, the book pushes us to think about the limits of our critical thought. Indeed, in taking the Arab leftist archive as a symptom, the book truly pries open the epistemological categories of modern social sciences. By asking what a theory is, the book shows us how we remain convinced that theory is an 'abstract, conceptual universe that hovers above' (9), located in the West and travelling unaltered to other spaces. Instead, what would it mean to view a theory like Marxism as material, and inescapably determined by the world it aims to conceptualise? What can we learn about Marxist theory from Arab leftist intellectuals? If the theoretical questions of the book remain essential to our knowledge practices, so too do the historical threads which still resonate as strangely familiar. As the author himself notes in the conclusion, the movement from aspirations of a revolution to disillusion mirrors the past decade of the Arab world. Why do cycles of revolutionary aspirations seem to always lead to the melancholia of disenchantment? What might we learn from the Lebanese New Left archive on revolutionary praxis more broadly?

If the book is avant-garde, one can only worry that the world in which it will be read remains far less so. Too often books that have strong theoretical arguments and challenge the very foundations on which knowledge production stand get quickly dismissed as doing 'too much'. One wonders as such if *Revolution & Disenchantment* will be engaged with beyond Middle Eastern studies. Will it be a core text for an introduction to intellectual history, for example? Here cynicism does apply as the book's reception seems so far to mirror the very assumptions it seeks to break down, where theory, when its receptacles are that of the Middle East, becomes once again relegated to the far shelves of area studies.

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Image Credit: Marble portrait of Karl Marx at Teatralnaya Metro Station, Moscow ([Terrazzo CC BY 2.0](#)).
