LEBANON: OF THINGS THAT REMAIN UNSAID

Rachid al-Daif

Without a doubt, a great deal was said in Lebanon about the student revolts in France in the year 1968. However, there are undoubtedly some things that remain unsaid—in particular, because these events took place following the defeat of the Arabs by Israel in 1967 and the rise of the Palestinian Fatah movement under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, a time when a revolutionary atmosphere hostile to the West and to America prevailed.

Not only we, the Lebanese left-wingers, but also the Arab left-wing in general, perceived in this student revolt tremendous support for the path of modernity and secularism that we believed Arab societies would confidently, assuredly follow, even if progress was so leisurely that we lost patience and, on occasion, our equanimity, too. This revolt, which we imitated and allowed to inspire us, fascinated us.

Effects of the revolt on everyday life

Many things, then, have already been said about these events; and many things still remain to be said. Yet I cannot remember reading or hearing anything about the way this revolt changed our everyday lives, our individual development, particularly in terms of our bodies and our clothes, as well as our relationship—especially the sexual one—between men and women of our generation. This is, in my opinion, highly significant, and because no one has yet paid adequate attention to the topic, I intend to concentrate on this alone.

I clearly recall this everyday impact. I went to bookshops to look at the photographs of events in the French newspapers and magazines. I imagined myself with the students in the Latin Quarter, felling trees and setting fire to tires to erect barricades in the streets; I saw myself digging up cobblestones to throw at the police, the instrument of bourgeois repression. The hair and sideburns in these pictures were long, as were the beards, which the students allowed to grow wild, completely ungroomed.

Long hair as a sign of rebellion

In the early days of our youth, we used to wear suits and matching ties, each according to his parents’ material circumstances. We
never wore clothes that were not ironed, and every couple of weeks we would get our hair cut by a professional barber. We shaved our beards almost every day, and I and my friends from the same modest background bought razor blades, which we sharpened repeatedly when they became blunt.

Then, in the course of the events of 1968, we grew muttonchops and grew our hair long. We no longer paid great attention to our clothes, as we had done in the past; sometimes we didn’t even pay much attention to how clean they were, and we were very proud of all this, because it was revolutionary. We implied that comrades who did not behave as we did were still prisoners of bourgeois thinking and bourgeois traditions, which were the remnants of a bourgeois view of the world. Sooner or later, one had to free oneself from this.

Our devoutness decreased

Our piety also waned further. This development had begun long before with the advent of the Arab modern age and continued through the age of the great reformers and on into our time. Throughout my entire time at university, which I entered in 1966, I never saw anybody pray or fast, neither Muslim nor Christian. If it became known that someone was fasting, that person would make reference to his parents or grandparents and claim only to be fasting out of obedience to them or something of the kind.

What was remarkable about all this was that we expressed our rejection of bourgeois norms although we never suffered from them, because, quite simply, we had never experienced them. Most of our families were poor or lived in modest circumstances: off the land or from casual work, or else on donations from family and relations abroad. Even to the well-off amongst us, such societal rules were not familiar.

Rejection of traditional customs

We let our hair and our sideburns grow until our families compared us to girls and made fun of us. It made them angry, but the reason for this anger was not that our behavior constituted a rejection of their customs and behavior, which indeed was not the case. My mother, for example, looked long and hard at my long hair and muttonchops and laughed uproariously. She exclaimed, “If only you’d been born a girl!” From time to time she would get slightly annoyed because my long hair made the whole towel wet when I took a bath on Friday night or Saturday morning—once a week, as was usual in
our house. If my brothers and sisters took a bath after me, they could no longer use the towel. This was a problem for my mother, because towels in our house were in extremely short supply. She therefore took to cutting up our old cotton shirts and sewing hand towels out of them; I had to use these as a punishment for my long hair and to avoid creating problems for those who bathed after me.

Lack of cleanliness among pupils was something that infuriated the teachers at our school. I remember that one teacher threatened to hit us hard on the tips of our fingers if he spotted dirt under our nails. Many of the pupils always had dirty fingernails because they helped their families in the fields. This teacher said to one pupil, who was a neighbor of mine, “Scrub your hands morning, noon, and night for a good long time with soap and pumice!” I will never forget this because my friend’s skin was very raw from working with his father every day before and after school and on school holidays. He mowed the field so that their three cows had something to eat. He helped his father milk them, mucked out their stall, and did other jobs that go with keeping livestock and farming. This pupil sometimes scrubbed his hands so long that they bled.

Before our rebellion, I had to wait patiently until my father, after much careful deliberation, bought me a suit, which I treated as if it had to last forever. And it did have to last almost forever, because I only got a suit every two or more years. I did not even wear it every Sunday but only on certain Sundays and on special occasions so that it still looked like new. Nonetheless, when we rebelled, we refused to wear suits and ties; our wardrobe now consisted solely of jeans. Jeans were avant-garde and revolutionary.

We heard a lot about sexual freedom, free love, and a free attitude to the body. That stimulated our imagination: we were young people starting out in life with all our vitality and vigor, and so we embarked on this adventure. One student who was studying at one of the French universities at the time told us that he had witnessed a provocative demonstration on one of the squares by advocates of sexual liberation performing sexual acts in a public square. The sex acts involved naked young men and women, young women on their own without men, and one young woman and her pet.

In our country, people had begun to call for the liberation of women in the mid-nineteenth century. Over time women had won many rights, while conservative moral traditions gradually retreated: the
veil was discarded, and women gained the freedom to choose a husband and equal educational opportunities, for example. We, however—the generation of Palestinian resistance, Vietnam and Guevara—were fascinated by the 1968 student revolt in France because it involved a rejection of sexual prohibition.

So we pounced on women in an unprecedented manner, and in doing so realized our dream of liberation as well as our dream of being a progressive people. Yet for us (or, to be more precise, for some of us), women became a sort of prey that had to be hunted en route to attaining freedom.

When I now think back on our behavior towards the young women, I feel a certain shame. Most of us were from the countryside, or from small towns that were even more countrified than the country, and our (progressive) view of women was prisoner to several-thousand-year-old traditions of manliness, patriarchy, chastity, shame, the forbidden, motherliness, emotionality, tenderness, and the clear division of gender roles. Thus, women were not equal partners in sexual liberation but conquests of the forbidden under a patriarchal order.

**Sexual liberation at the women’s expense**

Looking back on our behavior towards women, which was influenced by the news from France in 1968, I believe that we were cruel, sometimes even brutal, towards them. We men were experimenting, we men had the pleasure; they were the instruments of our experiments and of our pleasure, and we often treated them with a double standard. For example, one comrade in a left-wing Marxist movement believed that the body of the woman whose belly would contain his child had to be “pure.” For this reason, he had a “serious” relationship with the girl he had decided to marry but had...
flings with other girls he did not want to marry. Noteworthy was that he preserved the virginity of the one who was to become his wife and the mother of his children until after the marriage ceremony. This was at the start of the 1970s.

This was no isolated case; many comrades behaved in exactly the same way. Hunting women was a deed of glory. I remember that one of the comrades had impregnated a woman “by mistake” or “out of laziness.” When she told him, he left her to her own devices, so that she was forced to ask close friends for help. While they stood by her in seeking and getting an abortion, his role was limited to boasting to his close friends, his breast swelling with pride, about this “achievement.” Other comrades thought differently about this. They behaved as if the woman really did have the freedom to choose what she did with her body and did not lose her “purity” or “ chastity” if she exercised this freedom. They regarded the others as reactionaries, but of course they numbered only a few.

Nonetheless, at the time following the revolt of 1968, women’s liberation in general and sexuality in particular received a powerful boost. Discussions on these topics were heated compared to those in the past, and they were held in much broader circles like the Lebanese Communist organizations and parties, as well as in the Palestinian ones in Lebanon; they were also held in the nationalist parties influenced by left-wing Marxist thinking, some of which were very large and influential.

A consequence of such widespread sexual liberation, of course, was that the number of abortions rose dramatically, as did the number of doctors semi-officially performing them, often under unacceptable medical conditions. In the mid-1980s there were rumors in Beirut that a doctor who had specialized in offering almost official abortions had been murdered in mysterious circumstances. It was said that his murderers were fundamentalists who rejected this procedure. In fact, this event marked the beginning of a sea change toward piety in the city.

**Signs of increasing devoutness**

By the 1990s, religiousness was apparent everywhere. Sometimes the number of women in lecture halls wearing the veil was higher than the number without. The number of those fasting increased until they constituted an absolute majority. In many universities,
prayer rooms were established under pressure from the students (prayer rooms for women, and separate ones for men), and in the month of fasting, almost every sign of eating, drinking, or smoking in public disappeared from view.

Nonetheless, I do not believe that these signs can be taken as decisive proof that all traces of the events of 1968 have disappeared. I am almost certain that these traces are there, because the new attitudes and behaviors stimulated by the revolution, which represented a reawakening of a development that had begun long before, had become deeply ingrained, putting down roots in the ethics and culture of the Lebanese people. It seems unlikely that all traces of these events could have been completely eradicated, despite the turn to piety of the last forty years.

* An earlier version of this article was published in the Goethe-Institut cultural magazine *Fikrun wa Fann.*

**Rachid al-Daif**, born in northern Lebanon in 1945, is one of Lebanon’s greatest contemporary authors.