

## The Meaning(s) of Social Justice: Political Imaginaries from the October Movement in Lebanon

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### Abstract

Lebanon has witnessed a massive protest movement in 2019, commonly referred to as the “October Revolution”. The social movement denounced the Lebanese political and economic system, and demanded social justice. This paper investigates the political imaginaries of the protestors and proposes a discursive analysis that probes into their motives and positions. It further examines the various understandings and interpretations of social justice that underpinned the actions and visions of the social movement’s participants. The paper also aims to uncover the ideological assumptions as well as political limitations of the political imaginaries engendered by the “October Revolution”.

**Keywords:** Lebanon, Social Justice, Socio-economic Rights, Political Imaginaries, Social Movements, October Protests

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### Introduction

Roughly a year before the global pandemic, a wave of protests, uprisings, revolutions, and other forms of civil unrest and resistance engulfed the world (Wright 2019). To many observers, 2019 reflected unprecedented political mobilization, and was often compared in scope and scale to the late 1960’s—especially 1968—when civil rights, anti-war, student, and anti-colonial movements prompted street protests in dozens of countries (Nugent 2020; Wright 2019). One author describes 1968 as a year that witnessed a “spontaneous combustion of rebellious spirits around the world” (as cited in O’Hagan 2008). Indeed, 2019 could be described with similar language. By some measures, such as those conducted by risk consultancy Verisk Maplecroft, a total of 47 countries experienced some form of mass political mobilization and social unrest in 2019, including France, Sudan, Iraq, Chile, India, Venezuela, Algeria, Haiti, and a long list of others (as cited in Nugent 2020). Undoubtedly, and to a large extent, the grievances that underpinned these massive waves of discontent were specific to the context and history of each country. But as Miha Hribernik, head of Asia Research at Verisk Maplecroft argues, many of these grievances are linked to global political and economic trends. Among the concerns that motivated people to protest in all 47 countries, he contends, were “stagnating incomes, growing income inequality, corruption, the loss of faith in established elites, and the erosion of civil and political rights” (as cited in Nugent 2020). Put differently, demands for social justice—such as demands for economic redistribution and political rights—were a common denominator of the 2019 political

mobilizations around the world.

Lebanon was among the many countries that witnessed a massive protest movement in 2019, an uprising that was much larger than any the country had seen in decades (Daher 2019). The October 2019 uprising, commonly known as the “October Revolution,”<sup>[4]</sup> involved hundreds of thousands of people from different educational, class, sectarian, gender, and regional backgrounds who took to the streets to denounce the foundations of the Lebanese political and economic system and to demand social justice. Despite their ideological differences, demands and calls for social justice were a unifying thread of the October Revolution, and many protesters and activists “adopted a social justice discourse” (Khattab 2022, 14). Among the slogans heard on the streets were ‘the people want the downfall of the regime’; ‘our revolution is class-based’; ‘revolution, revolution’; and ‘down with the rule of the banks’ (Khattab 2022, 1). At one point, more than two million people demonstrated throughout the country in a nation of roughly six million (Daher 2019). But as soon as this unprecedented political mobilization began, Lebanon experienced a series of acute crises, all within the span of ten months. The first and most severe was an economic crisis, one that according to the World Bank potentially ranks “among the top three most severe economic collapses worldwide since the 1850’s” (World Bank 2021, xi). At the current time of writing, the Lebanese currency has lost more than 90% of its pre-crisis value. This was soon followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the economy’s downward spiral and “crippled the Lebanese health-care system” (Mjaess et al. 2021). And finally, the infamous explosion on Beirut’s port took place on August 4, 2020. Regarded as one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history (Amos and Rincon 2020), it caused more than 220 deaths and 7,000 injuries, and displaced more than 300,000 people (Cheterian 2020). The material damages of the blast were also devastating; by some measures, the cost is estimated at around 15 billion dollars (as cited in Daher 2020).

Among other reasons, the October Revolution took a series of setbacks due to these “compounded crises” (World Bank 2021, 3). More than two years later, it can appear to be a fleeting moment of the past. However, as scholar and activist Rima Majed argues, while the October Revolution might “not fall under the traditional definition of ‘revolutions’ found in social movement literature [...] it is important to think of them in terms of revolutionary *processes*, rather than as *events* that either succeed or fail” (Majed 2021). For scholar Joseph Daher, the MENA region as a whole is “in the midst of a long term revolutionary process,” a process that began when “the first wave of revolts in 2011 marked the opening of an unfinished epoch of revolution and counter-revolution” (Daher 2021). Hence, despite the waning of revolutionary fervor, this paper agrees with Majed’s contention that

it is important not to dismiss or downplay the role of these experiences as long-term processes shaping and transforming the political imaginaries of people in their everyday lives. It is this utopian and revolutionary potential of seeking and imagining an alternative – beyond sectarian, dictatorial or capitalist realism – that needs to be centered in our understanding of these historical moments (Majed 2021).

Building on this insight, this paper explores the political imaginaries of those who participated in and

helped shape the ongoing revolutionary process in Lebanon. More specifically, it seeks to present a discursive analysis that inquires into the motives and positions of activists, workers, and students who actively participated in the October Revolution in order to examine the different understandings and interpretations of social justice underpinning their actions and visions. By examining the meanings of social justice, the paper hopes to uncover the ideological assumptions and political limitations—in addition to the emancipatory potential—of the political imaginaries engendered by the October Revolution.

The next section of the paper will present a brief review of the literature on the October Revolution. This is followed by a section that presents the methodological and theoretical framework of this paper, which relies on semi-structured interviews and draws from the works of political theorist Nancy Fraser. The subsequent three sections will assess the understandings and meanings of social justice presented by the participants of this study. By using Fraser's framework, in addition to the insights provided by sociologist Rima Majed, these sections will discuss the differences, commonalities, emancipatory potentials, and limitations of the interpretations of social justice generated by the October Revolution.

### **The October Revolution: Trajectories, Causes, and Challenges**

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an exhaustive review of the literature on the October Revolution. However, in what follows, a brief summary of the topics, themes, and issues discussed by various scholars will be provided. While most studies discuss causes, motivating factors, and challenges, in addition to providing historical and sociological analyses of the uprising, examinations investigating the emerging imaginaries of social justice set in motion by the October Revolution are lacking.

Most scholars are well aware that the October Revolution didn't take place in a vacuum. Many view it as part of the "second wave" of uprisings in the region beginning in late 2018, a wave that includes Algeria, Sudan, and Iraq (Young 2019; Daher 2021; Majed 2021). On a more local level, scholars have noted the long historical process in which the October Revolution is embedded (Geha 2021; Majed 2021; Khattab 2022). Geha, for example, discusses the waves of protests that took place before 2019, most notably in 2011 and 2015. 2011 saw the rise of a wave of protests known as *Isqat al-Nizam al-Ta'ifi* (bringing down the sectarian regime), which, as the name suggests, denounced the sectarian regime, and which was inspired by the uprisings taking place in Egypt and Tunisia (Geha 2021, 9). 2015 witnessed another mass protest movement known as "YouStink," which was sparked by a waste management crisis, and which soon morphed into popular mobilizations that expressed grievances about precarity and unemployment (Khattab 2022, 7). On a smaller scale, scholar Lara Khattab has noted that between 2012 and 2018, "Lebanon witnessed between 150-200 labour actions per year, ranging from strikes to sit-ins and protests" (Khattab 2022, 8). The largest strike during that time was led by public secondary school education teachers in 2012-2013, who demanded wage increases and raised the issue of universal healthcare (Khattab 2022, 8). What this trajectory of protests demonstrates is that the demands and issues that emerged during the October Revolution are not "new;" they are embedded in a long historical process spanning more than a decade.

Many scholars focus their attention on assessing the causes and driving factors of the uprising.

Baumann, for example, argues that the uprising was “driven by the country’s deep social and economic crisis,” a crisis that can be traced to the combined effects of having an unproductive rentier economy, fiscal policies that created large-scale debts, high levels of poverty and inequality, and inadequate public services (Baumann 2019b). Likewise, Bou Khater argues that decades “of social and economic injustice were a driving factor in the social unrest that burst onto Lebanon’s streets in mid-October 2019” (Bou Khater 2021, 158), and links such injustices to the “failure of post-civil war neoliberal policies” (Bou Khater & Majed 2019, 8). Daher, Majed & Salman, and Khattab emphasize the combined effects of neoliberalism and sectarianism as the driving forces behind the uprising (Daher 2019; Khattab 2022; Majed and Salman 2019). In the words of Majed and Salman, the “uprising is a broad-based revolt against Lebanese-style neoliberalism—a kind of neoliberalism playing out in a context of elite-maintained sectarianism” (Majed and Salman 2019, 7). Taking a different approach, Chalak argues that the October Revolution originated as a result of a “singular act of will,” and claims that “the breakout of demonstrations on October 17 in Lebanon and their concatenation into a full-fledged revolution defies theorization” (Chalak 2019). Others, like Geha, focus their attention more extensively on corruption, sectarianism, and the Lebanese political system more generally, without addressing neoliberalism (Geha 2021).

Discussions also revolve around the various challenges and obstacles facing protesters. Daher, for example, makes reference to “considerable organizational challenges,” specifically “the lack of popular institutions that can channel demands, organize protesters across sectarian and geographical differences, and win out over more conservative elements” (Daher 2019). Several scholars have noted the weakness of working-class institutions, such as trade unions, and their conspicuous absence in the October Revolution (Bou Khater 2021; Khattab 2022; Daher 2019). Another slightly related organizational challenge is pointed out by Majed in outlining what she identifies as the “three streams” within the uprising. She discusses the presence of a radicalized stream, which is “thinking intersectionally, centering class inequality, gender inequality, and the questions of citizenship, race, and refugees...and demanding an overhaul of the neoliberal economic system as well as the sectarian political system” (Majed 2020). The second stream is more liberal, viewing the problems less systemically and focusing its attention on corruption. The third stream is more organic, mobilizes in ways that are more ad hoc, and doesn’t maintain a “clear political project or vision” (Majed 2020). The challenge, then, “is how to bring these three different streams together in order to advance the movement” (Majed 2020). In similar fashion, Khattab also brings to attention several related challenges, arguing that “organizing remains divided and unable to form a unified political alternative” (Khattab 2022, 14). Khattab also argues that the working poor and unemployed “have no organizations for them and by them,” and adds that the political struggle, as opposed to economic and social struggles, “remained the focus of middle-class anti-sectarian activism” (Khattab 2022, 14).

In sum, scholars have focused their efforts on providing historical and sociological analyses of the uprising, delineating the various causes and motivating factors, and discussing the various challenges and obstacles facing protesters. Consequently, analyses investigating the discourses and political imaginaries of the October Revolution are lacking, with only a few exceptions (Majed 2021; Khattab 2022). Similarly, qualitative studies are also lacking, as most studies adopt a historical perspective, and focus on analyses of the Lebanese political economy. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

## Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This paper is based on a series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted in Lebanon between March and April 2022. Most of the interviews were conducted in Beirut; however, participants came from and lived in different regions, including Beirut, Aley, Baalbek, Bikfaya, and Nabatieh. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, all of which were in-person, with activists, workers, and students between 23 and 37 years old who in various ways participated in the October Revolution. Nine participants identified as women, and 10 identified as men. All participants came from similar class positions and backgrounds—lower and middle classes—being wage-earners, informal workers, and unemployed. Moreover, many of the participants were attending or have attended university, mostly at the undergraduate level. In relation to political party membership, only one participant was an active member of a political party. It is important to mention that 18 of the 19 participants are Lebanese citizens, while one is a Syrian citizen. Despite its limitations, this decision is not arbitrary. Bou Khater and Majed, in a study that conducted a survey on a sample of 1,183 protesters across Lebanon during October 2019, found that 99% of protesters were Lebanese nationals (Bou Khater & Majed 2019, 11). Since refugees and migrant workers—for numerous and complicated reasons—largely did not take part in the uprising, this study focused on Lebanese nationals. Indubitably, the profiles of this study exclude some voices. Keeping such limitations in mind, this study tried to ensure a reasonable level of representativeness in relation to gender, class, region, and age, and largely accords with many of the characteristics outlined in Bou Khater and Majed’s study. The interviews revolved around different issues related to the uprising, including motivations and demands, obstacles and challenges, political enemies and allies, tactics and strategies, hopes and prospects, and most importantly, visions and meanings of social justice. All translations were conducted by the author, and all names have been altered in order to ensure anonymity. In addition, this paper relies on a range of recent secondary literature revolving around the October Revolution and the Lebanese political economy.

Theoretically, the paper draws on the insights of political theorist Nancy Fraser, who is one of the leading contemporary thinkers on social justice. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full summary of Fraser’s entire works on social justice; rather, a small summary of the elements found relevant to this study will be provided below.

Initially starting with a dualist perspective (Fraser 1995) of social justice that focused on the distinction between struggles for redistribution and struggles for recognition, Fraser today maintains a three-dimensional view of social justice, “incorporating the political dimension of representation alongside the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition” (Fraser 2005, 73). Accordingly, individuals and groups in society may suffer from three distinct species of injustice, namely, misrecognition, maldistribution, and misrepresentation. Misrecognition, a form of status inequality which is institutionalized in the state and economy and which corresponds to the cultural dimension, is “rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication” (Fraser 1995, 71). Examples include cultural domination, nonrecognition, and disrespect. Remedies for such injustices involve some measure of cultural or symbolic change. Maldistribution, which corresponds to the economic dimension, is “rooted in the political-economic structure of society” (Fraser 1995, 70). Examples include exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation. Remedies for such injustices involve some measure of political-economic restructuring. Misrepresentation, corresponding to the political dimension, “concerns the nature of the state’s jurisdiction and the decision rules by which it

structures contestation” (Fraser 2005, 75). By establishing criteria of social belonging to determine who counts as a member, the political dimension determines the reach of the other dimensions, and “tells us who is included in, and who excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition” (Fraser 2005, 75).

It is important to mention that to Fraser, the recognition, redistribution, and representation triad are co-fundamental dimensions of social justice; they are conceived as mutually irreducible *and* practically entwined. It is also important to note that Fraser’s categories serve as *analytical* distinctions, as all social practices entail elements of each dimension, although, and importantly, not necessarily in equal measure. Meaning, the economic, cultural, and political dimensions are not conceived here as separate “spheres.” They are “interimbricated so as to reinforce one another dialectically” (Fraser 1995, 72).

Most crucially for the purposes of this paper, Fraser distinguishes between two broad approaches to remedying injustices that cut across the political, economic, and cultural dimensions. The first, what she calls affirmative remedies, aim “at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them” (Fraser 1995, 82). The second, what Fraser calls transformative remedies, aims “at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework” (Fraser 1995, 82). To give one example, in relation to distributive justice the paradigmatic example of an affirmative remedy is the liberal welfare state, which seeks to redress maldistribution through various forms of income transfers. By relying heavily on public assistance, “this approach seeks to increase the consumption share of the disadvantaged while leaving intact the underlying economic structure” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 74). In contrast, transformative remedies are usually associated with socialism. Such strategies would “change the division of labor, the forms of ownership, and other deep structures of the economic system” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 74).

As will be demonstrated below, Fraser’s three-dimensional view of social justice and her distinction between affirmative and transformative remedies allow for a critical assessment that highlights the emphasis, limitations, and emancipatory potentials of the interpretations of social justice as espoused by the participants of this study. In the context of the October Revolution, her framework helps determine which aspects of social justice are addressed, and which aspects are sidelined. Specifically, and most importantly, Fraser’s framework helps determine the extent to which participants’ visions of social justice represent expressions of affirmative or transformative remedies.

### **The Liberal, the Radical, and the Organic: The Three Streams of the Revolution**

At the outset, the results of this study corroborate Majed’s contention concerning the three streams of the revolution. Samira, a 30-year old researcher from Beirut, would fit neatly into the liberal stream discussed by Majed, a stream defined by its focus on corruption and the belief that substituting individual politicians for “cleaner” leaders would be sufficient (Majed 2020). Despite noting economic grievances, throughout the entire interview, not a word was mentioned concerning the economic and financial system in Lebanon. Instead, Samira notes that “what made me go down to the streets, personally, is the environment of sectarianism. I couldn’t tolerate it anymore. After 30 years, I am disgusted” (Interview 1). The “main problem in Lebanon is the sectarian system, and the traditional

parties. Some people say Hezbollah is the main problem, but I don't agree. It's all of them" (Interview 1), she continues. During the interview, Samira emphasized corruption; she argues that "victory for me would be defined by taking parliament — with good people. At least a third. We need to put people in power who put the people's interest before their own" (Interview 1). The "dream," she continues, "would be to take back the stolen funds," referring to the money that politicians have siphoned over the years.

Zein, a 34-year old software engineer from Baalbek, likewise argues that "the main problem is corruption. And what's corruption? Well, its sources are the political class. And the consequences of corruption are that we don't have good healthcare, we don't have decent education" (Interview 5). Focusing more on the relations of clientelism, Zein notes that the main problem "starts after the civil war. The same people took over power. They force you to belong to a sect to obtain access to any services. If you can't afford private healthcare for example, you need to go to a sectarian party... This kind of system leads to all sorts of problems, such as corruption and so on" (Interview 5). Clientelism, here referring to a "system of non-state (or para-state) welfare and security" (Majed 2017), is perhaps one of the most important features of Lebanon's sectarian structure. In exchange for people's support, sectarian leaders provide a range of services, which include job placements, healthcare, and reduction in school fees to their communities. These patronage networks are maintained by the sectarian/political elite by blocking the state from assuming its responsibility for dispensing such services (Assouad 2021). The working classes, then, abide by the sectarian rules of the game in order to access a range of services, especially those related to welfare and protection. Zein concludes by saying that "for me, I believe in secularism, and I want Lebanon to be like Europe, like the USA, like developed countries. It's nice to be proud of your country. And I still don't feel I belong to Lebanon. No one in power represents me. I want to live a dignified life" (Interview 5).

Seif, a 26-year old student from Beirut, mentions that "the major reason I went down to the streets was to join what I would call a cultural revolution. I honestly didn't expect it, to see all the sects down there together, carrying one flag, calling for unity. It was beautiful to feel. So, I went down as part of an anti-sectarian sentiment, and for unity. Because Lebanon doesn't feel like a country. It feels like a cluster of districts" (Interview 16). Focusing on corruption, Seif adds that "people were hungry, angry, fed up from a corrupt system, which affected their education, healthcare, jobs, everything is corrupt, transportation... everything. It has always been every person for himself" (Interview 16). Seif then concludes by mentioning that he wants "politicians who respect people, not politicians who feel like royalty because they are in power" (Interview 16). In all these cases, participants understand the main problem as stemming from corruption linked to the sectarian elite and structure, leaving neoliberalism intact.

Many of the interviewees would ascribe to the more radical stream. Jalal, a 32-year old freelance actor from Aley, discusses how the ruling classes slowly plundered the state at the expense of everyone else, and notes that the "problem is the political-economic system post-1990. The state was destroyed by an extractive neoliberal system. Corruption stems from there" (Interview 2). Mariam, a 30-year student from Baalbek, notes that "the politicians are businessmen in power. They are one team. You can't divide them. They all have shares in the banks, they run the banks" (Interview 4). Mariam is here referring to the postwar period in Lebanon, which witnessed a closer integration of the political/sectarian and economic elites (Salloukh et al. 2015, 2). To demonstrate this overlapping alliance, Economist Jad

Chaaban has shown that in 2014, 18 out of the 20 banks with assets exceeding 1 billion US\$ “have major shareholders linked to political elites, and 43% of assets in the sector could be attributed to individuals and/or families closely linked to politicians” (Chaaban 2016, 6).

Similarly, Mohammad, a 26-year old journalist from the Beqaa region, discusses the nature of the problem in Lebanon by referring to “the economy, the role of the banks in our economy. Our economic system created severe inequalities. There are also problems that stem from the civil war, which were never resolved; they were just repressed. So, all these social relations, which are economic and political, these are all part of the problem in Lebanon” (Interview 6). Hussein, a 27-year old software engineer from the Beqaa region, also focuses on the banks, noting that “the enemy are the traditional parties, the central bank, and the local banks. This troika” (Interview 10). In like fashion, Farid, a 34-year old architect, notes that Lebanon is a “capitalist system that has been captured by mafias. We need to get rid of the mafias who are protecting the economic system. So, it’s a double battle, in one war” (Interview 11).

Zeina, a 30-year old social worker from Baalbek, also provides an intersectional analysis, noting that “we are a sectarian, violent, patriarchal society. People were fed up with all this. Also, the economy, obviously. The economy dominates everything,” and continues by mentioning that the main problem Lebanon is facing is “patriarchy, sectarianism, and the presence of Israel, which has distorted our development. And I understand patriarchy and sectarianism as the same system. Religious leaders dominate our personal lives. The laws that dominate us are religious laws, I mean the personal status laws” (Interview 9). Zeina is here referring to the sectarian structure which also extends to Lebanon’s legal system, whereby all matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, or custody, are governed by 15 different sets of religious laws, laws that specifically discriminate against women (Sussman 2011). Under such a system, Lebanese nationals are not ‘citizens’ as such. Instead, they are “members of religious ‘communities’ through which they subscribe to the state in order to access their political and social rights” (Majed 2017). Therefore, in such a system, political representation and important aspects of social life are tied to one’s sectarian identity. Also providing an intersectional analysis, Hasan, a 37-year old freelancer from Aley who works in the film industry, argues that “you can’t split the economy and politics. They come together. Sectarianism is a tool to maintain class structures” (Interview 15), echoing Daher’s contention that sectarianism is a “tool used by the Lebanese bourgeoisie to intervene ideologically in the class struggle, strengthening its control of the popular classes and keeping them subordinated to their sectarian leaders” (Daher 2016, 4). In all these cases, participants were thinking in a more intersectional manner; they envisioned an overhaul of both the neoliberal economy and the sectarian system.

The third stream, which does not maintain clear political projects or visions, is a little more difficult to classify, as their defining characteristics are less clear. Ghassan, a 31-year old unemployed carpenter, recalls that “we didn’t have a program. And personally, I didn’t know where to go or what to support. We knew that we didn’t want some people in power, but that’s about it” (Interview 18). When discussing his motivations, Ghassan said that he wanted to “vent out, express myself, also for the fun of it, for a sense of happiness...what was nice about it was the adventure, the action that was happening, fires here, roadblocks there, it was terribly exciting” (Interview 18). In discussing the nature of the problem, Ghassan mentions that “my enemies are the politicians. All the traditional parties. And I was also against all those who were against Hezbollah’s weapons. To me, these people are with



Israel. My problem isn't because of Hezbollah. My problem, if I go all the way back, has to do with Israel and America [referring to the USA]" (Interview 18). On the opposite end, Cindy, who is 25 years old and unemployed, maintains that her problem is "Hezbollah. That's the head of it. It's not a phobic position, it comes from facts, reality. Hezbollah is the head of the pyramid. I mean they are all corrupt. But why am I struggling? Because of Nasrallah's impact. He wants to make Lebanon an Islamic state, they want Iran here" (Interview 3). She continues by saying, "and we all know who's behind August 4 [referring to the blast].<sup>[2]</sup> I mean, he's the main character, isn't he? He's the main villain. There are others, but he's the main one. And we are paying the price" (Interview 3). Sandy provides another example of this stream. A 30-year old freelancer, Sandy said that she only went to the streets in order to try and change the Lebanese Personal Status laws and to see and support her friends. She maintained that she had no particular political vision in mind, but simply wanted to partake in a historic moment in Lebanese history, and "see where it goes" (Interview 8). Participants in this stream, then, don't fit neatly into liberal or radical molds, representing instead a more inchoate, amorphous position that does not maintain clear political projects or visions. The results of this study, then, substantiate Majed's contention concerning the three streams of the revolution, and highlights their ideological differences.

### **The Struggle for Redistribution**

Yet, despite their differences, this study finds that when asked to reflect on the meaning of social justice nearly every participant had similar answers, answers that generally referred to notions of a robust welfare state. Moreover, almost all participants maintained a clear class-consciousness that surpassed national sentiments, and most clearly allied themselves with migrant workers and refugees. Below are a few examples to demonstrate these points.

Samira, from the more liberal stream, mentions that for her, social justice means "that everyone has their basic needs met. Health, housing, education. They are completely absent in Lebanon. These needs are currently delivered through the market, hence, only the upper-middle class have some access" (interview 1). Mariam noted that social justice means "that everyone has access to free healthcare and education, decent housing, food security, strong infrastructure...for all classes living in Lebanon" (Interview 4). Mariam's insistence on classes who "live" or "reside" in Lebanon—instead of saying Lebanese—clearly expresses her solidarity with migrant workers and refugees. Zein argues that social justice would mean "the poor and the rich have the same rights. Free healthcare, free education, good transport systems; the essentials of life" (Interview 5). Similarly, Zeina argues that "social justice would entail being able to deliver to everyone all kinds of services. Healthcare, jobs, education, in all of Lebanon. The poorest people should be able to afford it, or it should be free...Honestly, I think the Scandinavian countries are the inspiration for us; something like those systems" (Interview 9). In another reference to Scandinavian welfare-state models, Hussien mentions that social justice would be "to have healthcare, electricity, water, roads, education. A strong government that plays its role in fostering development. The European model comes to mind...Denmark for example" (Interview 10). Farid sees social justice as "an absolute value. A society that supports each other. It would entail a society that doesn't maintain the rich and poor, the citizen and the immigrant. It would entail a society that has full support for persons with disabilities...Beyond that, it would entail access to basic human needs: healthcare, electricity, internet, roads, education" (Interview 11). In similar fashion, Sara, a

23-year old student, discusses the effects of the economic crises, and notes that those most affected are “people who don’t have lots of money: especially the lower classes. Migrant workers, Syrian refugees, their lives are really hard” (Interview 12). Likewise, Seif mentions “the right for education. I mean we need a strong, stable economy that would foster a healthier society. Also, think of the domestic workers. It’s horrible, they have no rights. Or people’s access to healthcare, which isn’t well met. If you have money you are fine, but if you don’t, you are doomed” (interview 16). As a final example, and which again refers to Scandinavian welfare-state models, Ghassan argues that:

To even speak of a just society, we need to remove social discrimination, those related to religion and nationality for example. It would mean that we don’t have people who are extremely poor and those who are rich. Social justice would entail human rights. I want rights, I want respect within government institutions, as a citizen and as a human being. We also need to talk about the rights of citizens and immigrants. You have to talk about Syrians and Palestinians, their living conditions and so on. And what about the rich? What will we do with them? And in Lebanon, we don’t even come close to having any sense of social justice. The poor are dying...I think the Scandinavian countries, or so I hear, these countries are the best (Interview 18).

In all these examples, participants demonstrate a clear class-consciousness that surpasses national sentiments. They further demonstrate, whether implicitly or explicitly, a sense of solidarity and alliance with those who are excluded from “the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition” (Fraser 2005, 75), namely migrant workers and refugees.

The references made to notions of a robust welfare state by most participants are, in part, surely an effect of the overlapping crises Lebanon is facing, especially the economic crisis. The economic crisis is so overwhelming that struggles for redistribution take on a much more significant weight. Moreover, Lebanon’s weak social security schemes and social services—in addition to extreme levels of inequality—provide additional significance to struggles for redistribution. Many scholars have noted how Lebanon’s neoliberal economy has translated into the promotion of financial interests and the simultaneous weakening of the welfare state, as illustrated by regressive taxation policies, weak social services and public infrastructure, the privatization of public enterprises, and inadequate social protection programs (Bou Khater 2020). Lebanon maintains a very low-grade infrastructure and weak public services, which include a dysfunctional electricity sector, inadequate solid waste management, water supply shortages, and weak health and educational services (Baumann 2019a). Those in Lebanon who maintain high incomes can afford alternatives to the poor condition of these services; those who are poorer, on the other hand, are more reliant on patronage networks and confessional charities. In relation to Lebanon’s social protection systems, a recent study found that, overall, “the existing social protection system largely fails in ensuring protection, leaving most of the populations residing in Lebanon behind, thus contributing to widespread social insecurity” (Scala 2022, 4). Social security schemes in Lebanon are tied to formal employment, but “informal” labor accounts for roughly 60 percent of the total employment rate (Scala 2022, 16). The Lebanese Labor Code also excludes several categories of workers from accessing social protection schemes, such as domestic workers,

agricultural workers, and daily workers (Scala 2022, 14). Accordingly, around “44 percent of residents do not benefit from any form of social protections” (Bou Khater 2020).

Regarding inequality, a study published by the World Inequality Lab in 2018, and which included non-Lebanese migrant workers and refugees, found that between 2005-2016, the “top 10 percent of the country’s richest individuals earned between 49 and 54 percent of national income, the middle 40 percent earned 34 percent, and the poorest 50 percent of the population earned between 12 and 14 percent” (Assouad 2021). Looking at wealth, “between 1990 and 2016, 10 percent of the population owned nearly 70 percent of the country’s total wealth, 1 percent owned close to 45 percent, and the poorest 50 percent were left with less than 5 percent” (Assouad 2021). These statistics place Lebanon among countries with the highest levels of inequality in the world, alongside Brazil and South Africa. Furthermore, after the economic crisis of 2019, and according to the most recent data by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, at least 82 percent of the population is suffering from multi-dimensional poverty, meaning that they are unable to afford at least one essential service such as electricity or healthcare (as cited in Ibrahim 2021).

But how should the references to a robust welfare state be understood? Are they an expression of affirmative or transformative remedies? When discussing the distinction between affirmative and transformative remedies, Fraser argues that, in principle, and all other things being equal, transformative strategies are preferable (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 76–77; Fraser 1995). However, in her later works, and inspired by the works of political theorist Erik Wright, Fraser acknowledges that the distinction between affirmative and transformative remedies is not absolute but contextual. She notes that “reforms that appear to be affirmative in the abstract can have transformative effects in some contexts, provided they are radically and persistently pursued” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 78). Accordingly, Fraser argues that some strategies represent a kind of middle ground between the affirmative and transformative, and are defined by their reliance on what she calls “nonreformist reforms” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 79). When successful, which largely depends on the context in which they are pursued, “nonreformist reforms” not only change the specific institutional features that they target, but “alter the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged. By changing incentive structures and political opportunity structures, they expand the set of feasible options for future reform. Over time their cumulative effect could be to transform the underlying structures that generate injustice” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 80). At their best, writes Fraser, “the strategy of nonreformist reform combines the practicability of affirmation with the radical thrust of transformation, which attacks injustice at the root” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 80).

In the context of Lebanon, calls for a robust welfare state should be understood as a way to challenge both the neoliberal and sectarian systems simultaneously. As Majed has argued, protesters’ “demands for an end to economic degradation — essentially an end to the neoliberal system — through reinstating elements of a welfare state would mean an end to the sectarian system, too. It would mean not having to go to your sectarian za’im [leader or boss] to be able to get your basic needs met, thus making the sectarian system redundant” (Majed 2020). Reinstating the welfare state, then, would strike at both systems simultaneously. Using Fraser’s framework, calls for a robust welfare state should be viewed as a strategy of “nonreformist reforms.” If radically and persistently pursued, such a strategy, over time, could shift the balance of power between capital and labor, altering the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged.

In an insightful remark, Fraser herself mentions that the strategy of “nonreformist reforms” has, historically, “informed some left-wing understandings of social democracy” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 80). She remarks that, from this perspective, social democracy was seen as a dynamic regime “whose trajectory would be transformative over time” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 80). Although it institutes an initial set of apparently affirmative reforms, such as universalist social-welfare entitlements, a large non-market public sector, macroeconomic policies aimed at creating full employment, and steeply progressive taxation, and although “none of these policies altered the structure of the capitalist economy *per se*, the expectation was that together they would shift the balance of power from capital to labor and encourage transformation in the long term” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 80). Crucially, however, Fraser notes how such a strategy is arguable, as “nonreformist economic reform may no longer be possible within a single country, given current conditions of economic globalization” (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 80). Hence, Fraser argues, “the strategy of nonreformist economic reform is well worth pursuing today - *on a transnational scale*” [my emphasis] (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 80).

### **The Struggle for Representation: An Absent International**

In discussing the political dimension of social justice, Fraser divides the injustice of misrepresentation into three distinct levels. The first, what she calls “ordinary-political misrepresentation,” concerns matters between those who are deemed “included,” which generally refers to citizens. Examples usually revolve around the kinds of electoral systems in place, and to what extent those systems deny some people (the “included”) “the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction” (Fraser 2005, 76). The second level concerns the “boundary-setting aspect of the political,” and refers to when a community’s boundaries are drawn in such a way so as to “exclude some people from the chance to participate *at all* in its authorized contests over justice” (Fraser 2005, 76). Here, misrepresentation takes a deeper form which Fraser calls “misframing.” Those who suffer from such injustice effectively suffer from what Hannah Arendt called “political death,” and become non-persons with respect to justice (Fraser 2005, 77). The third level is another type of misframing that refers to the process of frame-setting itself, specifically the way in which political space is divided on a *global level* (Fraser 2005, 80). It refers to what Fraser calls the “Westphalian grammar of frame-setting,” whereby the modern territorial nation-state is assumed by default as the appropriate unit of justice (Fraser 2005, 77–79). By taking the modern territorial nation-state as an unchallenged frame, political space is partitioned “in ways that block many who are poor and despised from challenging the forces that oppress them,” (Fraser 2005, 78) such as powerful predator states, international currency speculators, or transnational corporations. In Fraser’s view, then, the “Keynesian-Westphalian frame is a powerful instrument of injustice, which gerrymanders political space at the expense of the poor and despised” (Fraser 2005, 78).

As the previous section discussed, participants in this study clearly linked their struggles with, and defended the rights of, migrant workers and refugees. They not only sought to challenge what Fraser called “ordinary-political misrepresentation,” but also sought to challenge the deeper injustice of “misframing.” Their understandings of social justice actively challenge the “boundary-setting aspect of the political” to include those who are excluded from contestations over social justice, such as migrant workers and refugees. The latter are usually excluded from accessing the social protection system or are denied most of the social protection benefits when they are able to access it (Daher 2019, Scala

2022). This is further corroborated by the clear demonstration of class-consciousness as opposed to national sentiments, confirming Majed's contention that the uprising witnessed the "emergence of a new class-based alliance between the unemployed, underemployed, working classes and middle classes against the ruling oligarchy" (Majed 2019). However, it was in Fraser's second level of misframing, which refers to the "Keynesian-Westphalian frame," that participants fell short of.

Fraser's insight brings attention to what is perhaps the most severe limitation of the political imaginaries engendered by the October Revolution. In all of the interviews conducted in this study, only two participants brought to attention the international or transnational dimension. With these two exceptions in mind, the visions expressed by all of the participants remained within the "Keynesian-Westphalian frame." Almost all of the participants assumed that the modern territorial nation-state is the appropriate unit of social justice, and hence conceived of social justice within those limits, as represented by the image of a robust welfare state. Even in historicizing the October Revolution, only one participant mentioned the global and/or regional wave of protests happening in 2019 (Interview 17); instead, most referred to previous movements in Lebanon, with specific reference to the 2015 "You Stink" movement. To take but one example, Jalal, in historicizing the October Revolution, argues that "we have to understand and perceive long historical trajectories. 2019 was built by 2015, which was building on *Isqat al-Nizam al-Ta'ifi* (bringing down the sectarian regime), which in turn was built on the struggles before it. So, 2019 is preparing the ground for the future" (Interview 2). Lacking a transnational analysis and vision, calls for a robust welfare state are unlikely to maintain the transformative effects that, over time, could alter the underlying structures that generate injustice and shift the balance of power between capital and labor.

Taking a more transnational approach to social justice, the two exceptions bear mentioning. Bashar, a 26-year old engineer and, importantly, the only participant who was an active member of a political party (the Lebanese Communist Party), argues that "victory can't be achieved from within Lebanon alone. It has to be internationalist. For example, we need to fight the American imperial hand in the region. Or, we can't have justice if Israel exists as it does today" (Interview 7). Commenting on the welfare state, Bashar offers a critique by noting that, historically, "the capitalist system eventually broke it down. I mean, neoliberalism came about because of its failure to ensure profits and so on. And in Lebanon, specifically, such a welfare state is impossible, it can't survive. There are imperial forces, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, all these factors will stop you from developing such structures" (Interview 7). Lea, a 28-year old researcher, was perhaps most clear about the international dimension when discussing her visions of social justice:

My vision, ideally, is a regional movement. It has to go beyond Lebanon, necessarily so. Why? Because what we see across the region are simply different manifestations of the same problems. So, the vision is to create a regional, leftist, progressive movement that needs to also be internationalist. Otherwise the people of the region won't see the fruits of its wealth. Any nation-centric solution is futile. As a region, we will be able to fight back, distribute wealth, and create more egalitarian societies, no matter what shape that takes - maybe it will look like a regional welfare state!

With these two notable exceptions in mind, every other participant assumed that the modern territorial nation-state is the appropriate unit of social justice. And as Fraser has argued, given current conditions of economic globalization, economic “nonreformist reforms” that institute robust elements of a welfare state are likely to fail when only pursued on a national scale, especially in relatively weak countries like Lebanon. Moreover, after the end of the Lebanese civil war, Lebanon embarked on a neoliberal path that had been pursued elsewhere in the Middle East and in Western countries during the 1980’s, emphasizing deeper integration into the global economy and private-sector growth (Assouad 2021). These neoliberal policies, mirroring the region more broadly, also included opening to foreign capital inflows, the deregulation of labor and financial markets, and the relaxation of barriers to trade and foreign investment (Hanieh 2021). Scholars like Daher have also demonstrated the extent to which “international actors, both states and international monetary institutions, have played a significant role in consolidating the ruling elite and the neoliberal system in Lebanon”(Daher 2022, 14), highlighting the role of institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, regional investors from the Gulf states, and international actors like France in supporting and bolstering Lebanon’s neoliberal trajectory. Lebanon’s deep integration into the global economy, in addition to the extent Lebanon is exposed to and dependent on foreign capital inflows and investment, gives even greater salience to the transnational dimension.

The sentiments expressed by Bashar and Lea echo Majed and Daher, who both emphasize the importance of the international dimension. Daher writes that the region’s progressive forces must develop “collaborative relationships with progressive forces internationally. No socialist solution can be found in one country or in one region, particularly one like the Middle East and North Africa, which, because of its strategic energy reserves, has been a battleground for regional and imperialist powers” (Daher 2021). Likewise, Majed argues that the revolutionary uprising in Lebanon can only prevail if we link “our struggles together, within our societies and across the colonial boundaries of the nation-state” (Majed 2021). Only then, she argues, can the Lebanese uprisings reach its “full revolutionary potential, both ideologically and politically, beyond sectarian neoliberalism” (Majed 2021). The participants’ lack of a transnational analysis and vision represents the limitations of the political imaginaries and interpretations of social justice engendered by the October Revolution.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the political imaginaries of those who participated in and helped shape what can be considered as a still ongoing revolutionary process in Lebanon (Majed 2021). It inquired into the motives and positions of activists, workers, and students who actively participated in the October Revolution in order to examine the different interpretations of social justice underpinning their actions and visions. By relying on the works of Nancy Fraser, the paper demonstrates both the emancipatory potential and the limitations of the political imaginaries engendered by the October Revolution.

The paper argues that a vibrant class-consciousness and class-based alliances, coupled with notions centered on a robust welfare state which included migrant workers and refugees, represented the more radical, transformative, and revolutionary potential of political imaginaries that are seeking alternatives to sectarian neoliberalism. The limitations, on the other hand, are represented by the lack of international and transnational analysis, which delimits political possibilities. These insights apply to

most of the participants interviewed for this study, regardless of political leanings and ideology.

Given the scale of the multiple and overlapping crises Lebanon is facing, the revolutionary process is bound to continue. And surely, the revolutionary process faces numerous challenges, chief among them those related to organization. As many scholars have noted, there is a dire need for strong organizational forces in Lebanon to prepare for the coming rounds of upheaval. But the much more challenging task is to organize on a transnational level; to cultivate a regional and international vision and build networks of collaboration with progressive forces across borders.

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## Interviews[1] [2]

Interview with activist 1, March 19, 2022.

Interview with activist 2, March 20, 2022.

Interview with activist 3, March 20, 2022.

Interview with activist 4, March 22, 2022.

Interview with activist 5, March 22, 2022.

Interview with activist 6, March 23, 2022.

Interview with activist 7, March 24, 2022.

Interview with activist 8, March 27, 2022.

Interview with activist 9, March 29, 2022.

Interview with activist 10, March 30, 2022.

Interview with activist 11, April 6, 2022.

Interview with activist 12, April 7, 2022.

Interview with activist 13, April 7, 2022.

Interview with activist 14, April 11, 2022.

Interview with activist 15, April 12, 2022.

Interview with activist 16, April 13, 2022.

Interview with activist 17, April 14, 2022.

Interview with activist 18, April 15, 2022.

Interview with activist 19, April 17, 2022.

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[1] It should be noted that the word *thawra* (revolution) coexisted with notions like *intifada* (uprising) and *hirak* (movement). For a discussion on the use of these terms and their implications, see Majed (2021).

[2] For a variety of reasons, such as Hezbollah's influence on the Beirut port, Hezbollah was considered by many as mainly responsible for the August 4, 2020 blast.

