From Tribalism to Sectarianism: An Attempt at Theorizing Constitutional Othering in Contemporary Levant

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In ancient Rome, there was no need for people to have distinct names, they followed that of their tribe. For instance, a family of four children would classify their kids as young, middle, old, and first-born. There was no need for them to have their own identity because this identity was no expected to serve any purpose. Although two thousand years have gone by, this ideological reproduction of the self into a miniature replica is still present within contemporary Levantine societies. This paper will particularly shed light on 21st century Lebanon and its system of ideological stratification and inheritance; this structure functions on the basis of an advanced rendition of primitive tribalism, known as sectarianism. Consequently, this sectarian identity enables the othering of the self from its own surrounding as well as any "outsider". This constant and inter-generational practice is classified as a manifestation of persistence.

Understanding Tribalism

In its traditional sense, the notion of tribalism refers to the inter-group loyalty brought about by the trade of identity for the sake of security. Tribalism was a fundamental contribution to social stratification systems of various socialites, particularly early nomadic middle eastern ones. However, with the advancements of time and urbanization as well as modernization of settled Middle Eastern nations, there was no longer the need for tribal identification. Yet, the group-identity continued to become a very fundamental factor for defining the self. Contrary to Žižek's example of Malcolm X exchanging his last name for a mere letter of anonymity, Lebanese people used their once assigned tribal names as surnames.

These surnames function as social markers. They do not only signal which tribe one belongs to, but they also carry crucial information regarding the person's place of birth, economic status, their family's political affiliation as well as religion. The defining factors of the self are assigned to the child as soon as they begin to carry the surname; thus, the tribe becomes an identity. This not only abolishes the need for individuation, it also hinders the path of intellectual advancement. It does not leave room for the manifestation of diversity or curiosity; as the recipe in a cookbook that always results in the creation of the same cake, these tribal expectations dubbed within the parasol of the surname become a stamp that guide the person's choices and decisions.

Even while taking into account the modern nature of societies, such as the contemporary Lebanese one, the parameters of being outcasting an individual largely pertain to the person's conformation to the tribal expectations. If these expected social roles are not fulfilled, there is a stage of acceptable rebellion. Nonetheless, these circumstances do not last since any aspect that threatens the cultural re-productivity of ideology is excluded from the social compass.

Contemporary Sectarianism

Tribalism cannot be equated with sectarianism; however, while observing the case of contemporary Lebanon, the notion of sectarianism has grown to encapsulate variables that were not included in tribalism. For instance, if a Lebanese person carries a certain surname, they are expected to be affiliated with a particular religious and political group.

The interesting aspect of this sectarian regime is its implicit othering of those who do not belong to the expected sect. The interwoven nature of sects also determines the parameters of socially acceptable relationships, be it romantic relations or acquaintanceships.

The tribalism becomes a rendition of a subculture within one land. The borders of identity are no longer cultivated through ideologies that are interpersonal; the person becomes a representation of a bigger image of an even grander stance that is ideologically inherited.

These ideologically reproduced and replicated values and beliefs go against Žižek's understanding of the self, because the self no longer becomes defined as the distinction from the other. But rather, the self exists in isolation, as an entity in-itself that is entirely constitutional. The self is devoid of any individual decisions or choices, they become a delegate of sectarian ideology.

The delegation of the identity functions as a mask that each person is expected to wear in order to ensure a place within society. This mask ought to be adjusted based on each age group, it also entails gender roles and career expectations. Consequently, the self becomes the mask. Therefore, as per Žižek's understanding of social roles, the mask has no substance beyond it because it becomes the only defining factor of the individual. Going back to the idea of surnames defining the person, if the mask of a person is equal to that of their siblings and relatives, therefore the lack of individuality not only becomes interpersonal, but also inter-generational.

Any variation of this mask and its conception is treated as a threat to the sectarian social structure of all the people included within the group. Therefore, if outcasted by the parameters of the mask, the person becomes exiled. The social exile begins as a benign act of misapprehension and it may even result in the total mistreatment as well as the abolishment of the person's membership in order not to taint the stance of the rest of the members of the social group.

The group belongingness becomes the mere defining factor of the self that differentiates it from the rest of the people who are bound to modernize the self, or cultivate a more nurtured version of the sectarian identity.

This mask of expectation creates a vacuum that hinders the process of integration as well as restricts the ideological advancements of its members. In Žižekian terms, the self becomes the projection of replicated limitations that are exoticized but never entirely resolved. An identity fixation becomes an inter-generational glitch.

Theorizing Constitutional Othering

When looking at the nations across Levant region, it is important to understand that these nations were a byproduct of French and British mandates. Consequently, the social stratification system that was in place prior to the establishment of the mandate was largely Ottoman. The resultant mandate was a reenactment of the social stratification system; this created the keystone of the constitution of Levantine countries.

Therefore, the very essence of tribalism is constitutional through its guise of sectarianism. The latter is fundamentally true for the case of Lebanon, having in mind that the rest of the Levantine countries, though segregated, are not sectarian by law.

However, the constitutional stance of othering is reinforced not only by the sectarian divide but also due to collective trauma. While observing the case of Lebanon, we notice that the country has never faced any constant stability that lasted for a relatively long period of time. Even contemporary Lebanon is suffering from the collective trauma of civil war. The recollection of the divisions of war come about as renditions of interpersonal struggles of integration into other social groups.

The conception of the other as the enemy is transmitted through traumatic instances from the civil war memories of the people. This hinders the process of intercommunication by abolishing trust. The collective trauma becomes a glue that brings together peoples of the same social group; naturally, all others outside the group are transformed into enemies.

Although sharing the boundaries of the same country, the sectarian divide functions as a barrier for the peaceful coexistence of sects. Diplomatic relations and alliances persist on political grounds, yet the social stratification system is too deeply ingrained within the identity of the peoples – it becomes impossible to separate the trauma from the memory which in turn dictates the parameters of the self.

This othering of all nonconforming agents of the social group encompasses people of different ideologies: those with various political and religious affiliation as well as people with unconventional beliefs. The othering not only functions as a way to segregate between political and religious groups but it also explicitly excludes all those who have ideological inclinations that do not conform to the group's perception of the self.

The group's image of the Real becomes that of the expectation of the rest of the society, the dis-fulfillment of which results in social humiliation. Žižek can explain this humiliation as a liberal's wanted response; however, within the case of contemporary Levant, this humiliation includes the stripping of the only mask.

If the mask is rightly stripped from the face of the traditional sectarian individual, the void beneath it does not have any other agents of identification to ground its stance. Therefore, this othering becomes a manifestation of the persistence of the tribal identity. Some scholars claim that it is a justifiable mechanism of survival of the minority groups in turbulent regions such as contemporary Levant. However, the other ought not to be the only definer of the self. The negation of collective identity traits has morphed into becoming the defining factor of members of social groups. This hinders and limits the process of modernization of the self as well as the integration of the person within groups that might enable their personal growth. The other's acceptance and adoption are treated as a maladaptive method of growth in these collectivist societies. Yet, the only possible way to bring about a period of internal peace for the nation(s) would be to reconstruct the people's understanding of the other as an enemy. Consequently, this will enable them to regain a sense of compassion which will add identity traits beyond that of hate and misidentification with the enemy. The neighbor would no longer function as a threat, but rather as a tolerated human relationship. It would need a cultural revolution to bring about sentiments beyond tolerance at such an early stage where trauma is deeply rooted.

To conclude an attempt at theorizing constitutional othering in the contemporary Levant, particularly in Lebanon, entails a sense of de-culturing the process of othering. The current sectarian system established upon the debris of what once serves as tribalism is merely the enforced mask of ideological incarceration that is hindering modernization and integration. The latter does not encompass the loss of identity; by integration, we do not refer to the American notion of a melting pot that abolishes the individuality of its subgroups. The process of integration, in the Levantine region, would be the healthy identification strategies brought about by the people who are aiming to emerge from traditional collectivist societies. The de-culturing and restructuring of ideological othering would have to bring about a sense of unity for people, contrary to their indoctrinated and inherited trauma pertaining to the "enemy" notion of the other. Theorizing constitutional othering enables the comprehension of the limitations of the current sectarian ideology at hand in Lebanon. This ideological inheritance is observed as a remedy, it is portrayed as a key to the persistence of certain social groups; however, it is damaging and disabling the identification processes of people trying to find a middle ground of identification as Lebanese citizens rather than members of particular sects. The othering is bringing about a sense of intrapersonal and interpersonal disdain. It has become a defense mechanism against the once prominent threat of decay.

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