

Makdisi, Ussama. *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. ISBN 0-520-21846-9.

In his *Culture of Sectarianism*, Ussama Makdisi conceives sectarianism as a modern phenomenon, one that emerged with the Ottoman Tanzimāt in the 1840s, and concurrently with the European interventions in the internal affairs of “the sick man of Europe” that followed. It is this cut between the old and the new, or the pre-reforms and the Tanzimāt, that structures not only the major thesis of the book itself, but many of the narratives that the author uses in support of his thesis. Makdisi would thus like to present an historical and dynamic view of sectarianism, at least one that does not lock the various Lebanese confessional communities into permanent ahistorical and religious conflicts whose essence would be in some presupposed “tribalism” of those Arab *milal*. Thus, besides being an outcome of the reform policies, sectarianism “is a discourse that is scripted as the Other to various competing Ottoman, European, and Lebanese narratives of modernization” (p. 6). The assumption here is that the Ottoman imperial bureaucracy, European governments, their protégés and consuls (in particular the British and French), and the Lebanese élite *muqāta’ji* families (in particular the Maronites), all created discourses of modernity, and even though different, they still overlapped with one another in that they all construed Mount Lebanon as a region of archaic and sanguine conflicts, described in terms of “tribes” and “religions” with never ending conflicts. They were thus all oblivious to the fact that a couple of regional and international factors have contributed in a shift of power relations, first between the central imperial bureaucracy and the various Lebanese communities, and then, within those same communities, and, finally, between the notable families and their base, in particular the peasantry (but also possibly the Maronite clergy from which originated for the most part the popular and laborious classes of society). To be sure, the Egyptian occupation of Greater Syria (1831–

1840) was what initiated the watershed, followed by the demise of the Shihābs in 1841, who had been ruling Mount Lebanon since late in the eighteenth century, but who were granted so much protective privileges under the Egyptians that the withdrawal of the latter meant their own final demise. Since then, and a fortiori after the peasant revolts in 1858, the massacres of 1860, and the *mutaṣarrifiyya* rule that followed, Mount Lebanon had a difficult time.

How was then this sectarian discourse of the Other construed? To begin, Makdisi does not look at the Ottoman discourse—the one at least that emanated from the central imperial bureaucracy—as one from the “inside,” meaning that it was one, among several competing others, that the local *ahālī*—or *ra‘iyya* in Ottoman usage, or the *‘āmmiyya*, as the peasants and commoners in the 1858 uprising called their “movement,” or the *juhhal* (“ignorants”), as their clueless masters labeled them—had to confront; hence the sectarian discourse of the Other was a “protective” shell that would eventually lead those communities in the modern era. In fact, Makdisi insists that “Mount Lebanon was communally reinvented [since the 1830s] in the sense that a public and political sectarian identity replaced a nonsectarian politics of notability that had been the hallmark of prereform society” (p. 68). The assumption, therefore, is one of a “political break” (*coupure politique*) between communities constructed on religious identities—prior, say, to the Egyptian rule in the 1830s—and those same communities who had to struggle with modernity by constructing sectarian identities. Thus, Makdisi perceives the sectarian project as so different from its religious predecessor that even the attempt to conceive the reforms and their aftermath in terms of “the reemergence of a coherent, primordial religious identity” (ibid.) as an historical fallacy to which many historians have succumbed, since “They have not examined the anxiety inherent in this new elite sectarian project; nor have they sufficiently noted its obvious contradictions, its tentativeness, and its underlying fragility” (ibid.). But since the book is mostly rooted in the early and later *Tanzīmāt*, with only a sketchy account of the Egyptian experience in

the 1830s, and with even sketchier accounts of the traditional—or pre-modern—communities of the early nineteenth century, it is difficult, at least from my standpoint, to get any convincing view of where the difference lies between the “religious”—or should we say the “confessional”?—and the newly emerging “sectarianism,” and more importantly, why wouldn’t a revival of the old confessionalism be possible?

The problem lies, I think, in Makdisi’s characterizations of the Lebanese *ancien régime* as one of “elite violence deployed to reaffirm a rigid, status-based social order defined as the rule of knowledge over ignorance. Local communities did not identify themselves tribally or nationally, and they subsumed their religious identities within a political and public space that accommodated differences of faith” (p. 29). Such an order, we are told, cut Lebanese society in two: at the top, stood the notable *muqāṭa‘jī* families, with the commoners, *ahālī*, at the bottom of that hierarchy, and rank rather than religion was what brought those communities together *through a minimal cohesion of their élites*: “Family alliances occurred across religious lines, creating alternate kinships that transcended differences of faith” (p. 35). But while Makdisi proceeds to draw that picture of cohesion “from the top,” one that brought a de facto stability to the “old régime,” we remain uncertain as to how the peasants and commoners managed the abusive fiscal conditions instituted by their notables. Was it enough, one might rightly ask, that the social flirtations at the top—which did not even include religious intermarriages, but only formal “tolerance”—be enough to establish a status quo within the “limits of Ottoman influence”? Considering that a rich historiography of the social and economic conditions of Ottoman Mount Lebanon exists, inaugurated in the late 1960s with the work of Iliya Harik and Irena Smilianskaya, and then revisited only few years later by Dominique Chevallier, and more recently by Richard van Leeuwen (the long and protracted civil war has apparently discouraged many historians for more archival work), I find it erroneous that Makdisi fails to integrate their findings within the framework of his own research. That would have definitely complicated his limited picture to the point perhaps that the

“narratives of violence” might have taken another dimension, or at least we might have perceived them under another light. Instead, contributions to the socio-economic history of Lebanon are listed in the lavish bibliography, and sporadically commented in the long and equally lavish footnote section (pp. 175–229). In one such footnote, Makdisi laments that “Materialist historians such as Irena Smilianskaya and sociologists like Samir Khalaf have argued that the violence in 1860 was in essence a corruption and a ‘diversion’ of class struggle into sectarian life” (p. 212). Such an attitude, one might add, was common throughout the recent civil war (1975–1990) when pro-Marxist intellectuals, among others, also construed the war as a “hidden” class struggle with a religious (sectarian) ideology at the surface. But there is no need, however, and no point in simply reversing that formula: it is not really a question of materialist versus spiritual, or socio-economic versus sectarian for that matter. In the same way that, to use Makdisi’s own concept, there is an historical discourse of sectarianism, one that evolves in space and time, and which brings politics together with geography, violence, and religion, there are “economic” discourses of property, contract, tort and crime, and kinship, which may overlap at times with other discursive practices. The point here is that if we manage to draw, based on the available historiography and documentation, a broader picture than the one imposed by Makdisi, under what light will the history of modern Lebanon appear?

To begin, there is no need to postulate religion—whether in the old régime or the new one—as some kind of social epiphenomenon that accompanies much deeper social and economic transformations. Nor is it helpful to conceive of sectarianism, as Makdisi does, as that problematic evil spirit that the Lebanese had to go through, and still go through, in order to survive the modern times. And finally, the conception of sectarianism as the discourse against the colonial Other (or should we say one that mirrors that Other?)—whether Ottoman or European—is not helpful either. For one thing, religion is a total phenomenon, one that absorbs daily life, politics, the economy

and law. Religion does not structure the lifeworld causally, but it provides a system of values that provide opportunities for a group of people to structure their daily experiences with meaningful norms. In a society like Mount Lebanon, where the economic does not dissociate itself as an autonomous level from the religious and political, landowning patterns and fiscal policies were thought from within the politico-religious hierarchy. Thus, the Maronites, because of their special religious status as *dhimma*, had legally protected themselves with what Ibrahim Aouad had termed a “*droit privé*,” a mixture of customary practices and canon law, and a system where women did not inherit much property, and where arbitration was directly under the tutelage of the clergy. Moreover, when Maronites opted for the Beirut Sunni courts rather their own clergymen, it was precisely because women, under Ḥanafī practice, could be kept outside the system of waqf beneficiaries. The conversion of some factions of the Shihābs from Sunni Islam to the Maronite faith (even though Bashīr II kept his faith play like a riddle to his own entourage), was, to be sure, a unique case in Ottoman Syria, but also an example that proves the rule; namely, when a notable family decided to expand its domination beyond its own districts, it had to had the “right” religious coloring. There were things that the Shihābs could do as Maronites—for example, special ties to the Church; or landholding and inheritance patterns not subject to shari‘a law—that would have been costly to maintain as Sunnis. They also kept their relations for the most part endogamic, intermarrying among cousins—a practice that the Catholic Church in Rome considered as incestuous, but which they nevertheless maintained because they thought of it as economically advantageous (in the same way as the Druzes did)—and when they married from the outside, they gave preference to Circassian slave girls.

The point here is that if we consider religion as a total phenomenon, which historically manifests itself in different forms, then any disruption at any level, in particular if it triggers a crisis within the values of the community, could provoke a massive restructuring over a long period of time, and, to be sure, the Tanzīmāt period as a

whole did represent such a challenge. But conceptualizing the transformations for that period and its aftermath as sectarianism-in-practice does not add any explicative value to the nature and scope of the societal changes that Mount Lebanon went through. For one thing, it unnecessarily fragments Lebanese history into a pre-modern and modern typology, without, however, even bothering as to the historical consequences of such a division. Makdisi describes such entities of the “old régime” as the family, village, and rank as “secular identities,” while a public and political culture existed that “functioned through an unspoken recognition of the temporality of loyalty,” and with the nobility knowing and accepting its limits (p. 36). But what was it that made the old-régime family “secular,” and how did it then get sectarianized—together with identity, landscape, and the politics of the nobility—with modernization? I find it hard to conceive an institution like the family outside the realm of the religious. For one thing, anything from marriage, divorce, inheritance and death, all fall within the domain of religious law, and all share a direct economic value. Moreover, those are typically the kinds of institutions whose change, under an historical period of intense restructuring, is extremely slow, almost imperceptible, and always to be accounted on a *longue durée* basis. We therefore need to follow their evolution over very long durations—longer, say, than economic cycles of prosperity, crisis, and decline—to determine when, how, and under what circumstances they were subject to change.

A more compelling analysis would not dissociate family, identity, and rank from the religious in the first place, and they definitely did not get sectarianized during the early or late reforms, nor did the politics of the nobility for that matter. Makdisi has a hard time describing those historical changes, thus reducing them all to a newly-born sectarian politics, simply because he did not invest enough effort to track them down to their complex institutional roots. He traps himself into simplified images of the “old régime,” thus secularizing institutions that had nothing secular in them, then sectarianizes what was already religious and always functioned as such. In short, instead

of eliciting how the religious assumes different historical roles, he proceeds by sudden cuts, first from one period to another, and then within the institutional frameworks of each period.

Despite such shortcomings, I would agree with Makdisi that the period under scrutiny had something very different from the early part of the century, but what exactly? Speaking of the beginnings of confessional troubles in the 1840s, right after the demise of the Shihābs, Makdisi notes that “the local elites knew that in the post-*Tanzimat* world this power was to be had only along sectarian lines” (p. 76). And those same élites “sought to transform their religious communities into political communities and to harness invented traditions into their respective causes” (p. 77). Then, regarding the 1860 massacres and their aftermath, Makdisi notes that “At stake in Kisrawan was more than a physical struggle over control of land. There was a contest to redefine the term *ahali*, a well-embedded trope in old-regime chronicles. A single, undifferentiated category of the *ahali* was, after all, a construction of old-regime chronicles; it was a source of legitimacy for those rulers who guaranteed the tranquillity of the common people and who maintained a stable social order” (p. 104). Several things were at stake in this transitional period, outpaced perhaps by the notion of the destabilization of the existing social order. To begin, we need to work the first half of the nineteenth century thoroughly to check whether the “disruption” claimed by Makdisi was not already at work even prior to the Egyptian invasion. To be sure, the extensive silk cultivation and manufacturing in Mount Lebanon has linked a primitive economy to European capitalism, a process that must have affected landholding patterns, fiscal policies, and hierarchies within the nobility, either within the confessions or across confessional lines. Pro-Marxists, or those who look upon the “material conditions” as having their last word, might perceive such transformations as crucial in undermining the old feudal order and placing Lebanon under the yardstick of world-capitalism, meaning that classes will not only inevitably replace the old social categories, but more importantly, they will constitute the new

paradigmatic existence of the various Lebanese communities. In short, modernization implies a new class-struggle paradigm within that of the newly formed nation-state. But, as Makdisi rightly argues, sectarianism has prevailed, beginning with the *Tanzīmāt* and up to the modern period.

The disruption of the old order—whether historicized on a *longue durée* basis, or perceived as an inevitable outcome of the reforms—implies that the old hierarchy of knowledge has been disrupted as it is no more exclusively produced and circulated by élite groups, whether secular or religious. The *abāli* were no longer a single coherent group, whether in the eyes of their own nobility or in their perception of one another. The tools and forms for the transmission of knowledge have been enormously complicated by the ubiquity of what Benedict Anderson has labeled “print capitalism.” Division of labor in society has in turn become more complex, opening the way to new professions and markets. But excessive professionalization, and the ubiquity of the printed materials that eventually led to a new form of knowledge circulation, only helped in the isolation and alienation of individuals from their social milieu, hence from their religious groups. In other words, both professionalization and the proliferation of knowledge from various sources, by dismantling the old hierarchies, contributed in the loosening of individuals from their communities; but, paradoxically, it was that kind of individualization that disrupted the old communities and that was to create a new revamped role to religion—call it sectarianism, if you wish. An essential aspect of modernization implies the demise of the old empire systems, which will effectively only take place by the end of the First World War, and their replacement by a combination of colonial nation-states. But the culture of the nation-state assumes individuals accepting the common political language of that state, a proposition that turns out to be problematic in multi-sectarian societies like Lebanon. In effect, with the dismantlement of the old political hierarchies, which in themselves were centers for the production of knowledge, a new common political language sets itself gradually within the (mostly religious) community, but this time that

language does not emanate from visibly established centers of powers. Instead, it is a common and confusing pool of contributions and power-distribution, and within such a milieu the religious gains new grounds simply by virtue of being the most common language within the community. In short, religious language achieves an unprecedented source of notoriety.

The *Tanzīmāt* are often referred to in modern Ottoman historiography as “centralizing” attempts from the imperial bureaucracy. Indeed, centralization, and its corollary decentralization, have been widely demarcated as concepts that denote either hegemonic policies, or in periods of weakness, the relaxation of such policies. Centralization, however, is a western concept that fits well with the coming of the nation-state, but is unsuitable to describe the imperial policies of an empire. In fact, centralization is too radical a concept as it presupposes the application of a set of norms over a national territory, while decentralization implies the bureaucratic delegation of such tasks to various authorities. But such concepts do not work well in the context of an empire simply because empires do not attempt to impose unified norms over their multi-ethnic territories. They rather proceed by implementing various plans of rationalization primarily with fiscal purposes in mind. Thus, the *iltizām* system had such a scope: it was considered more efficient and rational than its predecessor, the *timār*; and so were the *Tanzīmāt*, which unsuccessfully attempted to abolish the *iltizām*, and only managed to revamp the judiciary by drastically limiting the role of the *sharī‘a* courts. Makdisi associates the birth of sectarianism with the evolution of the *Tanzīmāt* on the basis that the *ahālī* found themselves into an alien discourse of modernization. There was thus, following this view, an internal process of Ottoman colonization that preceded the French one and prepared for it. I tend to see a slow implementation of the *Tanzīmāt* in Greater Syria, one that probably grew stronger in Mount Lebanon because of the uprisings and massacres. Moreover, there was a unique dynamism in the Lebanese socio-economic relations that led to bypass, since early Ottoman rule, the *timār* system, which

in turn led to an early adoption of the *iltizām*; and by the nineteenth century, the evolution of silk manufacturing, and the disproportionate expansion of Beirut, all led to an autonomy of the Lebanese system that was not much related to the Ottoman reforms. Moreover, the various Lebanese communities did not grow along similar lines—a further indication of religion as a “cosmos” that absorbs the lifeworld—but diverged greatly, and more so under the impetus of a proto-capitalism in the region, which contributed in their internal tensions. Thus, the Maronites and the other Christians, who embraced more forcefully than others the economic expansion, had their nobility lose for the most part control of politics, and gradually a “middle class” came into being, one already anticipated in the dissolution of the *ahālī*, while both Druzes and Shī‘a managed to maintain their old feudal families. Thus, while the Druzes “won” a military victory in 1860, their political hierarchy was so well conserved that it represented all by itself a political defeat. That pattern could in fact be observed throughout the twentieth century, and to date, the Druzes are still represented by the Junblāṭs and Arslāns.

To conclude, unless we look at religion as a total historical phenomenon that shapes the societal relations within a community in their totality, we then face the danger of misrepresenting transitional periods by attributing to them historical missions that they certainly would not have shared.

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