

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jens Hanssen. *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 280 S. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-928163-3.

Reviewed by Zeynep Celik (School of Architecture, New Jersey Institute of Technology)
Published on H-Turk (October, 2006)



Jens Hanssen's *Fin Siecle Beirut* is a key contribution to the growing literature on the late-nineteenth-century Ottoman cities, a period that includes the long reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1908) and that Hanssen coins "the era of provincial capitals" (p. 75).[1] The validity of this premise has already been demonstrated by a collection of groundbreaking essays co-edited by Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber.[2] The current book, based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation at Oxford University, expands on the themes introduced in *Empire in the City* and engages in a revisionist evaluation of the late Ottoman social, political, and cultural history in the Arab provinces through a focused analysis of Beirut from the 1860s to the eve of World War I, that is, from the aftermath of the civil strife in Mount Lebanon through the Young Turk governments. (A minor frustration with the book is the lack of a clear statement on the time bracket it covers.) Modernity, defined as "an urban phenomenon whose origins are ownerless and not nationally bounded" (p. 8), is at the heart of Hanssen's inquiry. His reading of Beirut from this perspective reveals hitherto overlooked aspects of urban reform that swept through the empire, starting with the capital and spreading to cities, ranging from Salonica to Sana. The specific conditions, dynamics, and actors, carefully examined by Hanssen, attest to the complexity of individual experiments, hence cautioning against flattening narratives of Ottoman modernity. Especially important in the case of Beirut were the city's "relational capacities," namely, its rapport with Istanbul, as well as the "mediating role" it played between the capital and the province it represented (p. 20).

Situating Beirut within the "integrated political economy of and public sphere of Bilad al-Sham," Hanssen argues that an "imperial and urban politics of difference" gave shape to the administrative, physical, social, and

cultural aspects of the turn-of-the-century city. He maintains that this was a collective and overlapping endeavor by Ottomans, Europeans, and local notables, all of whom subscribed to some notion of a "civilizing mission" (p. 4). In a format that allows for triangulating the complicated processes and the resulting transformations from several vistas, the book is organized under three themes, "Capitalizations," "Mediations," and "Urban Words-Urban Worlds."

Part 1 surveys the development of Beirut from a small coastal city in the early nineteenth century to a provincial capital, looking especially at the simultaneous emergence of a centralized state (accompanied by an explosion of administrative services and Ottoman bureaucrats) and a local bourgeoisie, operating in dialogue with each other. With the declaration of Beirut as the capital of the province in 1888, the city acquired a long-lasting authority in the "territorial imagination," and nurtured a "nation of provincials" in accord with the new administrative division of the Ottoman Empire (p. 56). To explore the status of Beirut as a provincial capital (as distinct from a "colonial city"), Hanssen turns to projects that modernized the city's infrastructure, underlining the fact that while international banks and companies invested vast amounts in the new infrastructure, foreigners remained outside the decision-making institutions dominated by Ottoman bureaucrats and local elites. The operations comprised the enlargement and regularization of the port, construction of a railroad that would connect to Damascus and an intra-urban tramway network, as well as bringing gas (and later electric) lighting to the city, collectively leading to drastic changes in everyday life patterns.

The municipality, established in 1868 and modeled

after that of Istanbul (founded in 1856), is discussed in detail in part 2. Hanssen shows that its struggle to ensure urban hygiene as part of the city planning programs was challenged by French and British doctors, who had first worked with the Ottomans, but who established themselves as primary actors in public health from the 1890s; along the way, they began to mediate the penetration of imperialism into the Beirut society. The author capitalizes upon the complex development of the public health issue to display the unique character of Beirut's municipality: far from mimicking the capital's administration, it functioned in conformity with the "collective urban strategies" of local notables and merchants. Education reform, another Ottoman imperial project, was also turned and twisted according to local forces and conditions, casting light on the knotty relations between private initiatives and government programs, as well as a "considerable synergy" (p. 187) between Muslim (Ottoman and local) and Christian (missionary) educators.

"Physical places" and "mental spaces" are the topics of part 3. Analyzing the new buildings and urban spaces in social and cultural spheres (theaters, coffeehouses, public squares, etc.), Hanssen traces the tensions they brought to issues of class and gender, and makes a case for the emergence of an "elite discourse of morality and deviance" (p. 193). Filling these places with episodes of daily (and nightly) life, he illustrates how the cities defied the "Ottoman claims to urban control" (p. 201). Along the way, he reconstructs Beirut's nineteenth-century built fabric and explains the transformations with references to building codes that meant to bring a regular pattern to the street network. Hanssen then presents the reception of the image of modern Beirut by the Arab cultural revival movement (*al-nahda al-'arabiyya*) of the late nineteenth century, maintaining that the Beirut literati were instrumental in supporting and directing the urban transformations. The final theme discussed in this section is the official *fin-de-siecle* architecture that made a significant mark on the urban landscape, with its impressive scale and stylistic elements—eclectic, but clearly contemporary. The renaissance-inspired government palace (*petit palais*), the neo-Islamic clock tower, the neo-classical imperial barracks (*grand palais*), hospitals, and new schools (notably, the Sanaya, or the School for Arts and Crafts) were strategically placed on the hills above the old town. Unlike the colonial examples, they did not divide the city into two settlements, that of the colonizer and the colonized, yet they contributed to another type of segregation, based on class—as they were surrounded by the luxurious palaces of the local elite.

I hope this brief expose conveys the complex and fascinating stories covered in *Fin de Siecle Beirut*. Hanssen supports his provocative arguments by meticulous research, combing through archival documents and publications of the time and complementing them with a thorough mastery of scholarly literature on the topic. A comprehensive monograph on a crucial era in the history of a key Mediterranean city, the book also offers theoretical and methodological innovations. Several stand out among the latter. I would like to think that the call to carefully historicize the relations between the city, the state, and the society, rather than "jumping automatically to inquiries into nationalism or nation-states-in-the-making" (p. 55), will be taken seriously by urban historians of modernity. As Hanssen does throughout his study, giving a voice to individual players, whether governors, municipal officers, judges, literati, or simply petitioners, endows the larger narrative with a human touch and shows the power of citizens. Reconstructing the quotidian life and situating it into the urban spaces further reveals the indispensability of understanding the physicality of cities to reach a comprehensive social history.

I have some quibbles with *Fin de Siecle Beirut*. The dissertation tone lingers throughout, but is especially obvious in the introduction, where Hanssen undertakes the tired exercise of setting the theoretical framework with what seems to be today's mandatory references in all writing on urban history. At times, he is too quick to make a big claim without sufficient support and discussion. For example, his thesis regarding the Ottoman "imperial desire to present the state as a place of order, sobriety, and rationality" through the "homogenous" monumentality of the nineteenth-century buildings (p. 237) could be re-thought given the diversity in the architectural expressions, scales, and settings of these telling structures. But, these are minor issues that do not take away from the value of the study. *Fin de Siecle Beirut* is an exemplary book that will appeal not only historians of late Ottoman Empire, but to historians of the modern period in general. It will occupy a unique place in urban history.

Notes

[1]. Among the recent monographs are Jean-Paul Arnaud, *Damas: Urbanisme et architecture, 1860-1925* (Arles: Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2006); and Stefan Weber, *Damascus 1900: Urban Transformation, Architectural Innovation and Cultural Change in a Late Ottoman City (1808-1918)* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute Damascus in cooperation with the German Institute of Archae-

ology, Oriental Department, forthcoming, 2007); German version of Weber, *Damascus 1900: Stefan Weber, Zeugnisse Kulturellen Wandels, Stadt, Architektur und Gesellschaft des osmanischen Damaskus im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert* in *Electronic Journal of Oriental Stud-*

ies 9 (2006), forthcoming <[\\$">\\$](http://www2.let.uu.nl/Solis/anpt/ejos/EJOS-1.html).

[2]. Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, Stefan Weber, *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Würzburg: Ergon in Kommission, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-turk>

Citation: Zeynep Celik. Review of Hanssen, Jens, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital*. H-Turk, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12341>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.