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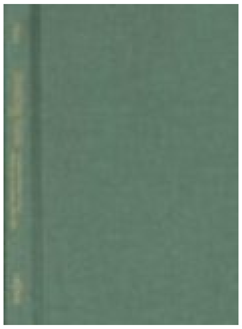

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Peasant Modernities: In Lebanon and in Immigration

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Akram Fouad Khater's *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* is a genuinely readable and engaging monograph in addition to being an important and timely piece of scholarship. Timely because its main themes–the role of gender and emigration in the construction of "modernity," "culture," and class–are just as pertinent today, where the twin dynamics of nationalism and cross-cultural fertilization are in constant tension. Indeed, Khater includes an important footnote wherein he eschews the term "diaspora," as it "localizes culture in a specific geographical area, thus allowing for an 'organic' specificity that very much fits nationalist discourse" (p. 194 n. 25). In *Inventing Home*, Khater traces the factors leading to mostly Maronite Christian emigration from Mount Lebanon, the emigrants' experiences in the *mahjar*, and their subsequent return to the mountain, which contributed to the rise of a rural-based middle class. Throughout, he describes how gender roles and relations both affected and were impacted by this "boomerang" emigration.

This study is a significant departure from those that have addressed the construction of a middle class elsewhere in the Middle East because, unlike in "Iran, Egypt, and Turkey[,] where modernity was the preserve primarily of the elites and the upper classes, in Mount Lebanon it was the peasants for the greater part who engaged in the processes of 'modernity' " (p. 187). Khater emphasizes that it was the rural population who forcefully shaped the Mountain, created new ”traditions,“ and impacted the ways in which woman and family were positioned. This book further corroborates other studies that argue that ”modernity“ was a dialectical process between ”east“ and ”west,“ and that a ”local culture“ is a constantly fluctuating m=lange of habits, traditions, and social discourse. In that vein, the author argues that tradition and modernity are not historically linear phases, but are constructed symbiotically, and that some ”traditions“ were actually more positive than the ”modern“ practices that replaced–and in some cases, invented–them.

The sources used are mainly, but not limited to, the archives of the Maronite parish of Lehfed, the Arabic-language immigrant press published in the United States as well as the Arab world, and the Smithsonian's archive of interviews conducted by Alexa Naff during the 1960s and 1970s with Americans of Lebanese descent. In addition, Khater draws on sayings and proverbs of the time to trace shifting attitudes towards women's roles, as well as towards the benefits or evils of new material items. Also, by combining available (and scarce) statistics, intelligent guesswork, and comparisons with similar immigrant communities elsewhere, Khater extrapolates figures as to, for instance, the rates of emigration and return.

The narrative largely begins in the second chapter, which links emigration to the decline of the silk industry in Mount Lebanon. Between about 1860 and the end of the 1880s, silk was a major source of prosperity for the Mountain through exports to France. It was also a scene in which gender roles and relations played out most conspicuously. Women–in actual fact, "factory girls"–comprised a pillar of this industry inasmuch as they were cheap labor and their employment sustained the local patriarchal hierarchy (male overseer, female workers), which eased the "taint" of having one's daughter working outside the home. In one of the strongest chapters of the book, Khater deftly illustrates the irony of this situation: the girls' work in the silk factories, while financially rewarding for the family and thus beneficial to its social status in the village, simultaneously kept these girls in a "public" space that reflected badly both on the girls and their families, particularly their fathers. Loathe to give up the extra money, fathers' standing in society was thus at once enhanced and reduced by their daughters' employment, and often cost daughters their own honor. At the same time, working afforded women a degree of financial freedom, one that grew over time. Ultimately, it allowed them to challenge a patriarchal system, first within the confined space of the factory, but later in the expanded arena of home and village. The " 'classical' patriarchal contract" (p. 38) was irrevocably changing, affecting family structures, marital practices, and social roles.

Money from the booming silk industry changed the value of social status and led to new consumer habits and expectations. Its subsequent decline after 1890, Khater argues, had the peasants searching for ways to reclaim the prosperity they had briefly tasted. Chapter 3 portrays the drastic downturn the industry took and how emigration was perceived as the best way to "make money" and maintain new lifestyles. Khater shows that about one third of the population of the Mountain emigrated, initially men: brothers, fathers, and husbands. Women were left behind, but not for long. Many soon followed their husbands abroad, or went in search of one.

Chapters 4 and 5 are most illuminating together. Having survived the arduous trip to the *mahjar* (in this study, mostly the United States), peasants discover that reality is much harsher than the dream. For most =migr=s, unforgiving working conditions and cramped housing were the norm. For example, women worked as peddlers, often walking in their slippers in the snow, slept nearby "strange" men at night in group houses, and occasionally arrived only to discover that their husbands were in fact residing with other women. Apart from that, however, "Syrian" immigrants also had to deal with the "predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon and protestant middle class" (p. 71) that cultivated a modernity based on antagonistic attitudes towards race, ethnicity, and gender. Khater depicts what were often extreme differences between life in the villages and the new adjustments that had to be made in "Amirka," whether it was cooking, notions of privacy, or sexual relations. Along the way, and particularly when they became relatively financially stable, immigrants inevitably adapted to their new world, largely by adopting consumer habits and white middle class values. The Arabic-language immigrant press illustrated the ways in which the migrants grappled with transposed village structures and habits, encountering new social and moral practices. Among other things, these newspapers and journals contributed in large part to defining a "Syrian community" across national and geographical borders, and endlessly debated women's roles, position, and potential.

Yet, for many, the "material comfort of the United States exacted a social cost" (p. 113) of persistent alienation. Chapter 5 recounts the return to the Mountain of what Khater posits as 45 percent of the original emigrants–a not unsubstantial rate. A new shock awaited these returnees. "In the *mahjar* they had elevated peasant life to romantic heights, but upon their return they shunned its 'traditional' reality for their version of 'modernity' " (p. 125). Khater shows how the return emigrants created a modernity in their own, more hybrid, image. Redefining "home" included new architectural and clothing styles as well as educational systems, gender roles, and marriage patterns.

Along the way, ideas of constructing a nation via motherhood and scientized domesticity took root. Chapter 6 elaborates on this in the vein of other studies on bourgeois notions of mothering and the role of women during the twentieth century. While women found new ways of participating in public life, such as writing in the press, it also created new constraints, such as the ways in which the spatial layout of new housing isolated women into a new, "private" sphere and eroded their previous homosocial networks.

Many immigration studies have been largely works of social history; Khater argues for the need to "link social and cultural history in ways that connect discursive signifiers to social relations" (p. 7). *Inventing Home* is an attempt to link social practices and events to the material indicators of a constructed modernity, from red tiles to pocket watches and make-up. Khater's work can, in this sense, be an important and different point of departure in understanding what is now Lebanon. Did notions of modernity differ between the Mountain and Beirut, as the port city grew in importance? If so, how might they have shaped the interaction between the new middle class Khater describes and Beirut's local populace? How did this interaction influence politics, society, and culture during the mandate and independence periods?

This book inspires further questioning and research. Khater indicates that his is largely a study of Lebanese Maronite emigration: the mostly landowning Druze community was not subjected to the same upheavals because it "remained outside the market economy being constructed in the Mountain" (p. 70). In that vein, how could one compare this study of Maronite emigration to the factors behind and consequences of (primarily) Shi'i emigration from, and return to, southern Lebanon during the twentieth century, and its impact on the rural population there? Outside the field of Middle East studies, *Inventing Home* is also a welcome contribution to gender studies, immigration studies, cultural history, and consumption studies, as well as an important step towards expanding those fields comparatively.

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