In August 2016, when Michel Temer became the president of Brazil, residents of São Paulo found themselves represented on all three levels of government by politicians of Syrian-Lebanese descent. In addition to Temer, whose parents were from the Lebanese village of Btaaboura, these politicians included the governor of São Paulo state, Geraldo Alckmin, and the mayor of São Paulo city, Fernando Haddad. All three came from different political parties across the political spectrum, evidence both of the important role that Syrian-Lebanese Brazilians have played in contemporary Brazilian politics, and of the ideological diversity of the community itself.

José D. Najar’s new book, *Transimperial Anxieties: The Making of Arab Ottomans in São Paulo, Brazil, 1850-1940*, provides valuable insights into the creation of São Paulo’s Syrian-Lebanese community. The book, which draws on original research conducted at the municipal and state archives of São Paulo, the Brazilian national archives, and the archives of the Brazilian foreign ministry, offers three major contributions to the study of Syrian-Lebanese Brazilians. First, it reframes the transnational history of Syrian-Lebanese immigration to a transimperial history that explores connections between the nineteenth-century Brazilian and Ottoman Empires. Second, it examines the integration of Arab Ottomans in Brazil within the context of their whiteness in a highly stratified multiracial society. Finally, it highlights the overlooked importance of Syrian-Lebanese women in the socioeconomic upward mobility of Arab Ottoman immigrants.

The first chapter analyzes nineteenth-century Brazilian ideas about the Ottoman Empire. It shows how Brazilian politicians used Orientalist attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire as a foil for challenging the failures of the Brazilian Empire, while assessing the Rio de Janeiro press’s coverage of ethnic and religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire. Building on this research, the second chapter considers how Brazilian-Ottoman imperial diplomacy, especially the 1858 Treaty of Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation, enabled Brazilian and Ottoman subjects to travel to and reside in each other’s empires, even as they remained subjects of the empire of their birth. While the chapter notes that increasing numbers of Arab Ottomans took advantage of these provisions to immigrate to Brazil, it does not give the reader a sense of the number of Ottoman immigrants involved, or any insight into the lives that they lived in imperial Brazil.

Chapter 3 moves to the cusp of the republican era, exploring a blood libel that saw many Arab
peddlers accused of the murder and cannibalism of Brazilian children, and which led to the expulsion of many of these peddlers from towns across the states of Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo. Najar situates the origin of this libel in the anxieties resulting from the impending abolition of slavery and astutely likens it to antisemitic blood libels that targeted Jews in Europe. But he fails to fully elucidate why Syrian-Lebanese peddlers were its specific targets. Did anti-Arab blood libels draw on antisemitic conspiracy theories, equating Arab immigrants with the more familiar figure of the Wandering Jew? Or did Syrian-Lebanese peddlers merely occupy a similar social niche as economic outsiders in a largely culturally homogenous society? Moreover, while Najar draws extensively on Po-chia Hsia’s classic study The Myth of Ritual Murder (1988), he does not engage with newer scholarship on the transnational phenomenon of antisemitic blood libels by historians such as Elissa Bemporad, Hillel Kieval, and Magda Teter.

The fourth chapter examines intriguing conflicts within the Syrian-Lebanese community during World War I around competing loyalties to the Ottoman Empire and independence for Syria and Lebanon. These conflicts involved journalists in the local Arab press as well as members of the newly formed Syrian-Lebanese Patriotic Society, an organization that promoted Syrian and Lebanese independence. While these conflicts, which involved verbal attacks and even outright murder, offer much insight into the Syrian-Lebanese community’s shifting transnational loyalties at a time of geopolitical transformation, it is unclear how they fit into the debates over Arab Ottomans’ contested whiteness that Najar has used to frame this and the following chapter.

Chapter 5 considers three court cases between Syrian-Lebanese merchants and peddlers around the turn of the twentieth century. Najar argues that by turning to courts in order to recover stolen merchandise, Arab Ottoman businessmen were performing their whiteness as honorable citizens, even as members of the community found guilty in these legal disputes effectively “darkened” the community’s reputation by embodying Orientalist tropes about dishonesty and criminality. While this is certainly a provocative argument, the evidence that Najar has provided is not sufficient to substantiate it. It appears from the legal testimonies analyzed that the primary motivation of the Arab Ottoman plaintiffs was in fact to recuperate their lost goods, rather than affirm their whiteness or citizenship, while there is little indication as to how these trials impacted the popular image of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Brazil.

The final two chapters turn to gender in order to complicate received notions about the maleness of most early Arab Ottoman peddlers. Chapter 6 analyzes the life histories of three Syrian-Lebanese female peddlers, using these life histories to show that women also played important roles in the socioeconomic upward mobility of the Syrian-Lebanese community. Meanwhile, chapter 7 explores diplomatic efforts to repatriate Brazilian women married to allegedly abusive or negligent Syrian Muslim men and living in the Middle East, and the attempts of Syrian-Lebanese Christians to assist in these repatriation efforts while simultaneously endeavoring to defend Muslim masculinity in order to safeguard their own belonging in Brazil.

Through police records, court cases, diplomatic correspondence, and the Brazilian press, Najar presents a plethora of sources through which to rethink Syrian-Lebanese ideas about empire, whiteness, and gender in Brazil. Particularly welcome is his analytical linking of antisemitism and Orientalism, even though his decision to substitute a clunky neologism of his own creation, “Jüdia(r)ção” (to Jew/jewing, a pejorative word meaning to cheat or deceive in both English and Portuguese), for the more conventional term “antisemitism,” is a rather perplexing one. More significantly, Najar’s choice to rely entirely on Por-
tuguese sources, despite his recognition of the importance of the Brazilian Arabic press as a historical source, results in a necessarily partial view of the Syrian-Lebanese community. One hopes that future work on Arab Brazilians will combine Najar’s conceptual innovations with research in Arabic as well as Portuguese sources in order to provide a more comprehensive approach to Syrian-Lebanese ethnic history in Brazil.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59839

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.