

Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power

Joanne R. Nucho

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In *Everyday Sectarianism*, anthropologist and filmmaker Joanne Nucho examines the inextricable links between sectarian belonging, Lebanon's confessional system of governance, and neighborhood infrastructures developed in the absence of the state (a refrain throughout the book is *wayn al dawleh?*). Departing from orientalist accounts that represent sectarianism as a static and primordial conflict of identities, Nucho argues that sectarianism in Lebanon is a modern, relational, and political *process* of continual (re)construction. In this sense, her account draws from existing literature on the Lebanese state that emphasizes sectarianism's contingent character (see, for example, Ussama Makdisi 2000; Max Weiss 2010; Suad Joseph 2008). For these scholars, sectarianism is not a given mode of being

in the world. Rather, it is a *project* inseparable from questions of gender, class, geography, and the state, and cannot be “collapsed onto religion or theology” (4).

Nucho alludes to the normative commitments of *Everyday Sectarianism* in the book’s introduction. She notes: “with more careful scholarship, we can demonstrate that even the most entrenched-seeming identity categories are constructed through far more contingent networks than we realize” (29). Nucho does not only seek to denaturalize sectarianism, however. She also laments that the “possibility for all kinds of alliances and collaborations” are foreclosed by sectarian political institutions (26). In this sense, Nucho critiques the state’s institutionalization and reification of sectarian difference, as well as popular discourses of ‘security’ which assume difference necessarily entails conflict. Here, perhaps Nucho’s account is compatible with Saba Mahmood’s argument (2015) that secular governance gives rise to more communal violence than other forms of social organization, though the book does not explicitly engage with Mahmood’s *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*.

Everyday Sectarianism focuses on Bourj Hammoud—a municipality just outside of Beirut, dominated by Armenians—and situates it within a complex historical backdrop. Though Nucho’s observations emphasize the heterogeneity of Armenians (in terms of religion, dialect, and class background), she traces a shared pattern of displacement among Armenians now settled in Lebanon: First, after the Armenian genocide (1915–19), many Armenians settled in the Middle East (as well as Europe and North America). In 1919, however, the French repatriated many to Cilicia in southwestern Turkey (15) until Turkish resistance culminated in the conciliatory Treaty of Ankara. Following the Treaty, France assumed control over Greater Syria, and Armenians who had resettled in Cilicia were uprooted once more. Finally, under the French Mandate government, a new wave of Armenians settled in Lebanon. Though the mandate system supposedly sought to help ‘underdeveloped’ nations acquire self-determination, Nucho notes how it functioned as a new form of colonial occupation.

Second, the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90)—marked by the militarization of neighborhoods and people’s increased reliance upon local, non-state, and para-state networks to survive and procure essential resources (e.g. credit, electricity, medical care, safe roads)—forms the book’s main historical backdrop. Notably, however, Nucho complicates strict divisions between state and non-governmental organizations through the concept of “jurisdiction,” which emphasizes the dynamic and unfolding character of

“sovereignty practices” (3). The Civil War made neighborhood associations and other informal networks into important sources of cooperation in the context of the state’s unreliability. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the state’s perpetual failures and breakdowns that increased people’s consciousness of the state.

The book’s introduction illustrates the historical context outlined above in detail, and provides a map of central concepts. Here, Nucho elaborates on her use of such terms as jurisdictions (3), infrastructure (5), the public (8), and urbanization. In Chapter 1, “All That Endures from Past to Present” provides a careful ethnographic account of a conflict in Bourj Hammoud and deconstructs popular discourses of violence and sectarian conflict, with special attention to questions of temporality. Chapter 2, “Permanently Temporary,” turns to two Armenian refugee camps and discusses what Nucho terms “informal property regimes.” She argues that housing and municipal technologies are an important means by which shared feelings of ‘sectarian community’ (e.g. “Armenianness”) come to be. In Chapter 3, “Building the Networks” and Chapter 4, “From Shirkets to Bankas,” Nucho turns her attention to the question of gender. Unlike conventional accounts of sectarianism that focus exclusively on ethnoreligious identities, Nucho demonstrates how sectarian belonging is also necessarily gendered. This reality and notions of “gendered propriety” (29) impact women’s access to essential resources—something Nucho examines in her case study of women’s informal credit associations. Chapter 5, “The Eyes of Odars” involves a shift in scale. It looks beyond neighborhoods and situates them within contestations over state infrastructure projects, which are linked to the “transnational circulation of expertise and resources” (29). This chapter calls into question the notion that a more properly centralized (or decentralized) state would solve Lebanon’s infrastructural issues. The final chapter of *Everyday Sectarianism* turns its attention to Syrians who have sought refuge in Lebanon following the Syrian War. It examines the maneuvers and mechanisms by which these refugees access public services and aid.

In conclusion, Nucho provides an empirically rich account that troubles ahistorical notions of sectarianism and orientalist depictions of the Middle East as a conflict-ridden landscape, marked by ancient feuds and tribal affiliations. In this important effort, however, *Everyday Sectarianism* understates the ways ‘sectarian’ sensibilities frequently exceed historical contingencies like the state. At times, the dispositions, embodied aptitudes, and modes of knowing central to sectarian belonging are also grounded in resilient discursive traditions. Islamic practitioners, for example, often

negotiate religious difference or conflict (*fitna*) within Islam through theological disputation and other resources within the tradition itself. While these dynamic modes of moral reasoning and being in the world are by no means static, they are also bounded and revolve around believers' shared aspiration towards coherence. Overall, however, Nucho's ethnographic study skillfully traces the construction of sects and sectarianism through complicated social networks, state institutions, and infrastructures, and successfully denaturalizes notions of "sectarian community." A fruitful engagement with *Everyday Sectarianism* might build upon Nucho's attention to the production of 'sect' and focus not only on how it freezes difference or inhibits solidarity, but also how it generates new knowledges, moral reasoning, and embodied sensibilities.

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