Article Type: Book Review

Jonathan Marc Gribetz, *Defining Neighbours: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 287, notes, bibliog., index, appendix, USD\$29.95 (Pb.), ISBN 9780691173467.

The first time my partner entered my Christian Lebanese environment she quickly managed to generate over lunch a heated debate on the Palestinian question, with some Christian Lebanese defending Zionists and attacking Palestinians in their unique kind of way and she defending Palestinians and attacking Zionists in her unique kind of way. For the sake of politeness, as a mark of hospitality and in order to ease the situation, our Christian hosts decided to find what they thought was common ground, so they shifted from a full-on support of Zionists to classical anti-Semitic raving about the Jews' obsession with money and their capacity to engage in international conspiracies. I had to go and whisper to a bunch of them to stop it and emphasise that this was really rude given that my partner has a Jewish background. One of them quipped: 'I am really lost here so, we can't bash the Palestinians and we can't bash the Jews. Is it ok to attack the UN or has she got relatives there too?'

The incident brought home to me something I never noticed when growing up in Lebanon in the 1960s and early 70s, but that I became aware of while living in Australia and conducting fieldwork among the Lebanese Forces in the 1980s: while Christians were on the whole more pro-Zionist than were Muslims, they were also, especially the middle classes, more likely to be anti-Semitic. Muslims were more likely to be anti-Zionists and less likely to be anti-Semitic. (As a note on the side, this could be useful to think about the current global alliance between Israeli right-wing Zionists and the Western ultra-Right, despite the anti-Semitism that is clearly festering among the latter). I got to remember all this while reading Gribetz's *Defining Neighbours*, an as-dispassionate-as-can-be work of archival research examining Jewish Zionists' and Arab Palestinians' perceptions of each other in the early twentieth century.

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The book is an excellent example of a case where historical research involves certain moves that are similar to anthropology. Anthropologists, as we know, need to work on themselves to disallow themselves from projecting their own culturally-specific understanding of categories and concepts into what might appear initially as similar categories and concepts that they encounter in the field. Likewise, as this book makes clear regarding the categories of Jewish, Arab, Muslim and Christian identification in early twentieth-century Palestine, historians working on different historical periods also have to work on disallowing themselves, and us their readers, from projecting current understandings of certain categories of identification into those same categories as they were understood and experienced at the time. In some well-thought-out and well-executed intellectual moves, the author also invites us to understand that even geographic categories such as 'Palestine', or even 'Jerusalem', did not mean the same thing they mean to us today. Different global, regional and local contexts, as well as different modes of institutionalisation, mean that a place is not imagined in the same way across history. That this book is interested in the way the various protagonists experience each other's identity, rather than in some kind of objectified identity produced by the researcher, further makes it akin to an ethnographic exercise.

Compared with the gradual ossification that was to follow the Balfour declaration and the intensification of the Arab and Zionist struggle for national territorial sovereignty, the book's strength lies precisely in showing and detailing how the pre-Balfour scene was marked by the multiplicity and richness of the categories of identification, the meanings associated with them, and the less than neat, and even contradictory way in which they inter-locked with each other, generating various fluctuating lines of solidarity and confrontation. I did not feel that the author made as strong an empirical case as he'd hoped for the centrality of 'race' as a category of identification. At times I felt that he saw a discourse of race where I didn't think that he showed us any existed, such as when discussing Abboud in the conclusion (pp. 236-238). Nonetheless, he certainly made a strong case about its significant presence. More importantly, he shows how the racial category was not necessarily invested in division, domination and hierarchy, but also in creating surprising lines of solidarity, such as Jewish-Muslim solidarity in the face of Christians.

If I have one general criticism of the book it has to do with the absence of an analysis of the way fluctuating relations of power mark the processes and experiences of identification. I am aware, as noted above, that the author's aim is to analyse the experience of identification, not analyse sociologically its structural determinants, etc. But his identities are experienced as if

they are mere signifiers of meaning, and what I am proposing is that people experience their identities as carriers of a certain power as well, and particularly a certain trajectory of power, what Nietzsche would call 'sense of power'. In Lebanon, for instance, we cannot understand the experience of Shi'a identification during the civil war without understanding the trajectory of the Shi'a as an ascending community. The sense of power that comes from this trajectory ends up marking the way one experiences one's identity. It is this dimension that I could find no trace of in this book. I think that those experiences of trajectories of power, grounded as they were in the relations of colonial domination (totally absent as a concept in the book), are present everywhere in the empirical examples provided by the book. A sense that Muslims were battling against a rising tide and a sense that Zionists already felt that history was on their side, as it were, marks everything that is being said and done in the book.

Nonetheless, this book remains an important work of research that provides us with crucial insight into the history and the present of the conflicts that mark the region. To me, what was the most instructive part of the book was the inter-subjective nature of the processes of identification at the time. Unlike the narcissistic forms of identification-for-oneself that marks certain forms of Arab and Zionist politics today, what is most 'other' to our time that is detailed in the book is the labour of identification-for-the-other: the care Arabs and Jews took in knowing what their other thought of them, and how to present themselves to their other in light of what they know this other thinks of them.

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