In the early twentieth century, when Australia's selection of its immigrants was based on the racial 'White Australia policy', many Christian Lebanese, who had begun immigrating to Australia in the 1880s, were often shocked to learn that they were classified racially as 'Asians' (based on Mount Lebanon being part of Syria and the Ottoman Empire at the time). In 1911, a Lebanese migrant already living in Australia sent a letter to the prime minister objecting to the classification and arguing that the Lebanese were 'Caucasians and they are as white a race as the English. Their looks, habits, customs, religion, blood, etc., are those of Europeans but they are more intelligent' (in MacKay and Batrouney 1988: 667). In fact, the belief in the Christian Lebanese's whiteness/Europeanness on the basis of 'looks, habits, customs, religion, blood, etc...' had begun developing in the mid-nineteenth century with the spread of capitalist social relations in the Lebanese mountains almost exclusively among the Christians. From a mode of identification that primarily stressed religious difference from a largely Muslim environment, the Christians' identity (especially the Maronite Catholics') was transformed into a racialized world view that saw difference from Muslims in terms of cultural hierarchy and culminated in the Christians' self-perception as more 'European' than 'Arab', and as 'white'. In this chapter, I want to examine this socio-historical process of white self-racialization, what it entails, and how it can best be understood. I will argue that an essential part of the process
is what I will call 'identity fetishism': a process whereby 'the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own' (Marx 1976: 165). Although Marx's analysis of 'commodity fetishism' is often considered as embodying his most complex theorization of ideology, as far as I know, it remains unutilized in the analysis of the ideological formation of identities. In this analysis Marx aims to show how certain social products that appear on the capitalist market 'detach' themselves, so to speak, from the social relations that produce them, and are experienced as having powers of their own. In much the same way as a 'fetish' is experienced as having an intrinsic power over a tribe, even though the tribe must have initially produced it and given it such power, commodities under capitalism are experienced as having a life and social powers in themselves and in abstraction from the social relations that continue to give them such power. At the core of Marx's analysis is that this experience of an inversion of power between product and producer is not the result of some 'mental or intellectual deficiency' on the part of people. It is not because they are not thinking properly about it that they perceive commodities from such an inverted perspective. Rather, the perception is the product of their practical experience. As Maurice Godélér famously put it long ago, 'it is not the subject that deceives himself, it is reality that deceives him' (Godélér 1975: 337).

In much the same way, I examine below how, in its emergence in the midst of the colonial transformation of the economy of Mount Lebanon, Christian Lebanese identity was experienced by those identifying with it as European and white, and as intrinsically endowed with a causal power to generate the very capitalist social practices that produced it. I conclude by showing what this identity fetishism can tell us about the relationship between colonial white racialization and class.

The Maronites and the Transformation of Mount Lebanon's Economy

When in 635, the Muslim tribes of the Arabian Peninsula invaded the Christian Fertile Crescent, the Christians and the Jews, being 'people of the book', were considered under the Islamic Shari'a law to be the 'dhimmis', or those to be tolerated and protected. Practically, these laws marginalized the non-Islamic communities. The latter were to suffer in certain circumstances 'outbreaks of intolerance on the part of the Muslim mob' (Rodinson 1981: 8). It was most probably in times like these that the majority of the Maronites, followers of Saint Maron of Antioch, fled northern Syria to settle in the northern parts of Mount Lebanon, seeking the protection of its rugged mountains (when exactly is a hotly debated issue—see Beydoun 1984). The southern part of the mountains gave refuge to the Druze, followers of a secretive offshoot of Shi'ite Islam originating in Egypt at the end of the Fatimid era. In their early days of settlement, the Maronites were an overwhelmingly peasant community working under the rule of Shi'a Muslim overlords (mugarta'is) within a quasi-feudal system known in Mount Lebanon as iqa'. The Maronite peasants lived 'either as landless serfs or metayers, or combined their primary labour as metayers with the cultivation of their own small parcels' (Saba 1976: 1–2). The Shi'a overlords were later replaced by the Druzes who were seen by the ruling Muslim authorities as having valiantly fought against the Crusaders. Furthermore, in the seventeenth century, important demographic changes occurred when the Maronites began to spread south into central Lebanon and to the southern Shuf Mountains with the encouragement of Druze mugarta'is. The Chevallier D'Avrieux who lived in the Mountain during that period noted that in the villages where they lived with the 'unfaithful', the Christians, 'had the entire liberty to openly practice their religion, to build churches and monasteries...The unfairness who are the masters allow them everything to keep them, so as to extract from them the sums of money they have to pay to the Ottoman Porte.' (Chevallier, Dominique 1982: 12). Beside the Maronites' geographic spread and increase in numbers, of equal importance was that they, like other minorities within the Empire, virtually monopolized marginal economic activities such as commerce and craft. When they moved into the Druze districts they were seen as coming 'to perform tasks Druze thought degrading' (Polk 1963: 216). This Christian quasi-monopoly over trade and crafts became increasingly significant as the economic developments of the late nineteenth century tended to make these initially marginal and 'degrading' activities increasingly central and led to the rapid growth of Christian villages.

An important example of this change was the Christian village of Dayr el-Qamar (Smilianskaya 116), which developed into a major trading town for silk as the Mountain witnessed a growth in the cultivation of the mulberry tree due to 'a growing demand for raw silk on the Egyptian market' (Saba 1976: 3). It also witnessed a growth in handicraft production which extended to other Christian towns in the central Mountain. These developments furthered the
spread of money transactions among the Christians, 'enlarging the scope for small accumulation among peasants and artisan producers, and a growing involvement of these or of other individuals in the slowly widening sphere of trade and exchange' (Saba 1976: 3).

Furthermore, the Maronite monks, who had earlier 'demonstrated to everyone that they were hard workers and could actually increase the country's productivity and hence the revenue of the muqata'jis' (Harik 1968: 114), were by the turn of the century slowly becoming big landowners in their own right. This new landowning role challenged the power of the Druze muqata'jis, even though, initially, the politics of the Mountain remained largely in their hands. Inevitably, however, signs of dissatisfaction with the existing political order emerged as Christian merchants and craftsmen, along with the Maronite Church, yearned to free themselves and their activities from the muqata'jis who had set out to benefit from the new economic developments by taxing mills, local trade, crafts, and the weighing of silk (Harik 1968: 64). The Christians, however, lacked the military power that could allow them to overthrow the iqta' system. This military power was to be provided later by the French who were already intensifying their colonial competition with Britain for the control of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the signs of the Ottoman Empire's end were many. The emergence of industrial capital in Europe had already set the Empire on the road of underdevelopment, destroying the local industries the Porte was unwilling or unable to protect (Mouzelis 1978: 12). The power of the central state was all but gone, and the control of the expanding capitalist activities in the region were increasingly seen by some of the local rulers as a source of enrichment. They set out accordingly to 'modernize' the state and their district, basically improving the infrastructure necessary for the penetration of capital. Thanks to the protection of its surroundings by the Prince of the Mountain, a Druze who significantly had by now converted to Christianity, Beirut became increasingly viable as a port for the export of silk to France. From 1833 to 1836 the silk exported through the port increased more than threefold (Polk 1963: 171–2).

Until the early eighteenth century the dominant European presence in the Empire was that of English and French merchant capital. The effect of this presence on the existing productive practices was minimal. For 'merchants do not make their profits by revolutionising production but by controlling markets, and the greater the control they are able to exercise the greater the profit' (Kay 1975: 96).

However, by the early 1800s, industrial capital began to emerge as a significant social force thanks to France's involvement in the development of the local silk industry, parts of which had been integrated in the circuit of French merchant capital since the seventeenth century (Smilianskaya 1972: 14).

As the Lyon silk industry developed, France aimed at increasingly monopolizing the Lebanese silk produce. Towards 1835, 25 per cent of the Mountain's silk production was exported to Lyon; by 1861 more than two-thirds were (Dubar and Nasr 1976: 53). In buying silk for French industry and, more importantly, in employing wage labour the French were speeding the development of capitalist practices within the Maronites' social sphere and integrating their economy within the capitalist system of production and exchange like never before (Chevalier 1982: 220). Of equal importance was the attempt at controlling production itself. In 1810, an industrialist from Lyon established France's first local spinning mill employing local labour (Labaki 1984: 79). The introduction towards 1830 of vapour heating into the spinning mills permitted their transformation from a family business to a capitalist industry 'that knows the division and mechanisation of work' (Labaki 1984: 79). By 1851, seven French silk mills were operating in the Mountain (Raccagni 1980: 364).

The increase in this activity accelerated the rise of an embryonic Lebanese Christian bourgeois class active in various sectors of the economy. The Beirut Christian bourgeoisie was mainly formed by the established local merchants who attached themselves to European capital. Already in 1827, the French consul in Beirut had reported that 'of thirty four commercial firms dealing with Europe, fifteen belonged to local Christians and six to Turks' (Issawi 1966: 71). By 1839, there were sixty-seven commercial houses of which thirty-four were Lebanese (Dubar and Nasr 1976: 57). These local merchants 'served as intermediaries between the European wholesaler and the local retailer, whose language they spoke and whose needs and tastes they knew... ' (Fawaz 1983: 86). In the Mountain's interior another group of intermediaries operated between the Mountain's silk producers and the Beirut houses (Chevalier 1982: 234).

The rise of silk as a crop transformed the peasant economy and weakened the dependency of the peasant on the muqata'jis, substituting it with dependency on the market (Polk 1963: 173). A class of rich Christian peasants emerged, buying land and employing daily workers, lending money to embattled muqata'jis as well as renting villas to rich Beirutis (Smilianskaya 1972: 25). The Maronite Church itself continued to amass riches and was establishing itself as the...
began to reassert some semblance of taxing power over them but these attacks were now effectively attacks on the French capitalist control over silk prices by expanding their money-lending network among the peasant growers (Smilianskaya 1972: 20). Likewise, the Maronite Church also continued to grow as a landowner, and strengthened its links to French capital through the selling of silk to the local French industry (Sharara 1975: 85). Beside widening the scope of accumulation for the local bourgeoisie, the European industries increased the uneven development between the Druze and the Christian communities. Of nine localities in which mills were established, only one (an English mill) was in a totally Druze district (Labaki 1984: 102). Therefore, capitalist social relations were continuing to develop almost exclusively within the Christian community, as the latter provided the majority of the mills’ wage labour (Sharara 1975: 85). By the late 1850s, some Druze musqata’js were sending their men to attack various Christian towns to try and reassert some semblance of taxing power over them but these attacks were now effectively attacks on the French capitalist interests in the towns. The French silk manufacturers explicitly requested the intervention of their government (Labaki 1984: 87).

As the situation degenerated into another communal civil war in 1860 with another Druze military victory, French troops were sent to Mount Lebanon and an international commission was set up to find a solution to Mount Lebanon’s ‘political’ crisis. The latter came in the form of what became known as the Règlement Organique (Spagnolo 1971: 26), which brought to an effective end iqta’ practices and the feudal powers of the Druzes and effectively replaced it with the colonial power of the French silk industry. As Raccagni puts it: The Règlement Organique of June 1861, recognising the autonomy of Mount Lebanon, indirectly gave the Lyonnese industrialists all they had wished: Lebanese autonomy from Constantinople presented a better guarantee for foreign investments, while the abolition of feudal privileges and the setting up of a land register enabled Maronite farmers to adapt the cultivation to suit export needs. (Raccagni 1980: 366)

The confessional delineation of the process of socio-economic domination and the fact that it was accompanied by equally confessional religious conflicts facilitated a general experience of this social change as a process of dominance of Christians over Muslims tout court. It is this experience that is reflected in the changing mode of Maronite identification that accompanied those transformations.
The Racialization of Maronite Identity

The Muslim Shari'a's differentiation of Christian minorities on the basis of their religious identity, and both their collective tolerance and persecution on the basis of this identity, have led the Maronites to become permanently conscious of their status as a religious minority in a Muslim-dominated region. This has created a constant impetus for internal cohesion. When the Maronites settled in Mount Lebanon, the need for cohesion was further strengthened by their collective subjugation, as an overwhelmingly peasant community, to the exploitation and sometimes tyranny of Shi'a Muslim overlords. Throughout that period, the struggle to maintain unity was mostly carried out by the Maronite Church (Sharara 1975: 59).

The writings of the Maronite historian Ibn el-Qilai (b.1450) clearly reflect the tendency for unification in the face of many divisive issues whether of a religious doctrinal, or of a more explicitly political, nature (in Daou 1977, part VI, chapter 2). Ibn el-Qilai treats the Maronites in most of his writings as a united communal subject, divisions being a deviation from the norm. He also gives us a clear image of Maronite aspirations in his depiction of a golden past:

But histories tell us of what happened in our home countries and to those who were before us the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon. They were united in the religion all working for it the rich as well as the poor obedience and love with faith. Heretics they did not have and no Muslim lived among them and if a Jew was found his grave was soon covered by crows. (in Daou 1977: 282-5)

Whether such a past existed is, of course, doubtful. What is important, however, is its glorification: 'God lived among them... Such glorification indicates what was perceived as desired in the present, and what the Maronite leadership, the clergy, to whom Ibn el-Qilai belonged, was struggling to maintain: namely, unity, and a purely Maronite Mountain, free from the presence of Jews and Muslims (Dib 1973: 102).

To strengthen the necessity of unity, the golden past is contrasted to a time of division which brought the defeat of the Maronites at the hands of the Muslim Mamluks, who were still ruling Mount when Ibn el-Qilai was writing:

The devil father of all tyranny saw the people of Maron happy he envied and sunk them in sorrow through two men who were monks.

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articulated to the Maronite identity began to undergo certain transformations. This is clearly seen in the writings of Bishop Nigula Murad in the 1840s who, while like Ibn el-Qilai and Istphan el-Duwaihi emphasized the unity of the Maronites, aimed at culturally differentiating the Maronites from the Muslims in general, and more specifically the Druze. This is, the practices Murad invokes to explain the distinctiveness of the Maronites are no longer strictly linked to the religious sphere or to the portrayal of the other as a political/military threat. In Murad’s opinion, Harik tells us:

The Druze...are inferior in all respects. They are religiously confused and socially backward, generally lazy with no skills or trades other than tilling the ground...Except for a few of them who have intimate contact with the Maronites...the Druze can neither read nor write. Beside they are dependent on the Maronites, for they cannot live without the Christians of the country who are familiar with all the occupations prevalent in Europe.

(Harik 1968: 139)

We can see here the importance of stressing that identities on their own, whether black and white, or, as is the case here, Christian and Muslim, are not ‘natural’ ways of delineating cultural differences. These differences are always the product of the historical articulation of cultural differences to identity differences. As we shall see, this articulation is crucial for an understanding of the historical process of racialization. We can see above, in the case of Murad, how a new basis of difference, a difference based on socio-economic practices: the ‘occupations prevalent in Europe’ as opposed to ‘tilling the ground’, is now explicitly emphasized along with the element of religious differentiation. This new differentiation reflects most clearly the Maronite experience of the spread of capitalist and capitalist-related practices among them. It is important to stress here, however, that what the Maronites experienced was not simply a change in their economic productive and mercantile practices. These could not but induce a further and more general transformation of their ‘way of life’. Polk, for instance, shows that what accompanied the intensification of capitalist penetration was ‘a change in tastes’ based on the domination of ‘Western goods’ (Polk 1963: 164). A further change in their way of life was also reflected in the second difference emphasized by Harik: the Druze, unlike the Maronites, ‘cannot read or write’. This difference based on reading and writing skills was as much the product of the new reality generated by the capitalist transformation as were the differences in economic practices mentioned by Murad. Already, since Pope Gregory XIII opened the Maronite college in Rome in 1584, many of its graduates returned and opened

Maronite schools in the area (Dib 1973: 42). More important was the army of French missionaries that were established in the Maronite regions in the wake of the French penetration of the region. These missionaries, belonging to various French congregations, initiated a veritable boom in schooling as they competed for students and influence. The competition between the Jesuits and the Lazarites was most notable (Chevallier 1982: 260–5). This education was not unrelated to the economic developments in the area. The Lazarites, for instance, explained that they had opened the Ayntura College in 1834, to educate the French children living in Syria and the ‘young Maronites destined to become tax collectors, shop owners, clerks and interpreters’ (Chevallier 1982: 264). The French traveller Volney remarked that ‘the most solid advantage which resulted from these missionary works, was that the art of writing became more common among the Maronites’ (in Salibi 1977: 13). In much the same way as they remained marginal to the capitalist development of the Mountain, the Druze were also marginally affected by the educational developments that accompanied it. Educational practices were experienced by the Maronites as specific to their community and part of what gave them a distinct identity.

An equally crucial aspect of Murad’s new mode of differentiation is its hierarchical understanding of the cultural differences between Maronites and Druzes. While for Ibn el-Qilai and el-Duwaihi the Muslims were seen as different and as enemies, for Murad they also became inferior. This is of course closely linked to the perception of the Maronites as part of a different civilization based on ‘the occupations prevalent in Europe’, reading and writing and the Western commodity. This is where we begin to get a clearer hint that this change in the mode of self-identification is a process of internalizing the racialized outlook that shaped European colonialism. Indeed, from that point onward, the Maronites increasingly saw themselves in the image of the Europeans, responsible for what their ideologues referred to, in a direct identification with the French colonialists, as a ‘mission civilisatrice’. This identification developed to the extent that by the turn of the century, a Christian Lebanese lawyer and a leading nationalist ideologue could simply claim that since the epoch of the crusades ‘the Maronites had become the first French people of the Levant’ (in Sassine 1979: 61).

This identification with France which emerged when the French took on the role of ‘protectors’ of the Maronites during the rule of the Ottomans was not merely an idiosyncratic intellectual affair but a deeply felt popular sentiment. When, in 1870, the reign of Napoleon III and the Second Empire ended, this was experienced by
the Maronites as a catastrophe since it was the imperial government that helped them in 1860. The people of the village of Damour thought themselves capable of influencing the course of events in France by marching in the streets and singing: ‘Either Napoleon is reinstated or the village will revolt’ (in Karam 1981: 183).

It is interesting to note that in this process of self-Europeanization and racialization, the language of whiteness and race is hardly ever used. This is because, as has often been argued (see Frankenberg 1993; Dyer 1997) with the rise of Western colonial hegemony, colonial whiteness is subconsciously internalized as a norm of what it means to be ‘human’ and does not usually manifest itself in speech and writing except in times of crisis. This is somewhat like the identity ‘being human’. We hardly ever go parading it as ours. We take it for granted for as long as everyone else around us does. But when this humanity is challenged, such as when we feel dehumanized by someone, this is when we make the explicit identity claim: ‘I am a human being.’ It is this same logic that governs the discourse of white identification. That this logic is part of the process of Maronite identification is amply demonstrated by the fact that whiteness does emerge in writing and speech whenever its normality is threatened and questioned such as in the Australian example we began with in the introduction. Interestingly, it was during the period of the French mandate over Lebanon, following the European powers’ carve up of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, that the ‘racial threat’ was at its most acute.

Having grown to believe that they represented the embodiment of Western civilization in the Levant, the Christian Lebanese found it hard to reconcile this belief with the idea of being themselves colonized by the French. No one has expressed the sentiment generated by this process like Fanjallah Hayek, a popular Christian intellectual at the time:

France has come to stay here with the Mandate’s text in its pocket, and a colonial experience in its mind … the Lebanese elite, the Lebanese clergy, the Lebanese peasant have welcomed the Mandate with a sentiment of security and an enthusiasm that no ink in the world can express … (But the French) have spoken too much of a civilizing mission. We do not need to be civilized … More than anyone else France knew our degree of evolution. Less than anyone else can it be forgiven for confusing things. (in Sassine 1979: 297)

It is in this state where ‘things are confused’ that the language of race and whiteness emerges. Hayek’s attempt at making things less confused is remarkable. He Lebanese, he asserts, are ‘white, white to the bones, of an unalterable white, authentic, that leads to no ambiguity; a fanatical white in opposition to the Moroccan, the Algerian or the Senegalese’ (in Sassine 1979: 296). And he boldly adds: ‘We owe a lot to our brothers of the black and yellow race. We regret being superior to them. Nature might be unjust but what can we do about it’ (in Sassine 1979: 297).

Similarly, in the 1930s and in the early 1940s, when the Christians perceived themselves to be threatened by an ‘Arab-Muslim’ drive to eradicate the Christian specificity of Lebanon, a series of Christian intellectuals assiduously set out to prove that the Lebanese differed racially from their Arab environment, often linking them to the Phoenicians or what became jokingly known as ‘nos ancêtres les Phéniciens’. This culminated in the writings of Michel Chiha who is considered a founding father of the Lebanese Republic. In ‘Liban d’aujourd’hui’, a seminal lecture he gave in 1942 (in French, of course), Chiha moves to ‘prove’ beyond reasonable doubt that Lebanon is distinct from its Arab environment and that the Lebanese cannot be Arabs. This is first apparent in the country’s landscape. ‘Lebanon of today covers a surface of 10,500 sq. km., almost the quarter of ‘Switzerland’ explains Chiha (1984: 24). Immediately, in this innocent comparison he removes Lebanon from its Middle-Eastern environment and repositions it in Europe. But the difference between Lebanon and its environment is much more concrete: ‘The Lebanese landscape possesses the most characteristic features of southern Europe. It particularly resembles that of the big Mediterranean islands’ (Chiha 1984: 23). In opposition to this peaceful resemblance, Lebanon ‘contrasts violently with the nearby landscapes, offered by the oases, the steppe and the desert’ (Chiha 1984: 23).

If Lebanon’s landscape makes it so different from its Arab environment, the Lebanese are even more different. Like others before him, but more scientifically, Chiha moves to demonstrate the Lebanese link with the Phoenicians. As importantly, Chiha informs his audience, that the Phoenician alphabet is today used by ‘the quasi-totality of the white race’. ‘To which we belong’, he hastily adds (Chiha 1984: 38). Reviewing the many people that had invaded Lebanon, he takes a special interest in reminding us that of the ‘thousands of Westerners who came from Europe, without forgetting the Scandinavians [!]... many never went back’ (Chiha 1984: 32). He goes through considerable pain to show that after those westerners many other non-Arab people came and stayed. The ‘racial proof’ that the Lebanese are not Arabs accumulates … To end with, Chiha injects into the Lebanese more of his favourite spem: ‘And let us
remember a fact that we cannot neglect. Only in the last twenty-five years, the mixed marriages between Lebanese and Westerners have produced thousands of children... (Chiha 1984: 34).

Immediately following this revelation concerning the sexual prowess of the Europeans in Lebanon comes the question whose answer had become obvious to any scientific reader who cares about facts: 'After all this, is it going to be said that the Lebanon of today is Semitic? Are we going to say that it is Arab?' (Chiha 1984: 34).

Faced with this occasional discourse of whiteness we have to ask the question: given that for all practical purposes, and like most Mediterranean and Arab people, the Christian Lebanese come in a variety of colours and shapes, how did they come to perceive themselves exclusively as white? Do people like Nujaym above develop some kind of paradoxical colour-blind racial ideology? And if not, where does the prevalent whiteness he perceives resides? But this question does not need to be asked only in relation to the white component of the Maronite identity. It is also relevant to all the components we have examined above (the feeling of superiority based on acquiring a variety of practices, skills, and tastes 'similar to those in Europe'). Although we have clearly shown that this mode of differentiation had a definite basis in the reality of the Maronites, it should be remembered, however, that with the capitalist transformation of the Mountain, the Maronite community was composed of a variety of classes who benefited unequally from the spread of capitalism. Consequently, it would be ludicrous to think that capitalism had transformed every single Maronite into a new subject practising a 'European occupation', capable of reading and writing, and with a developed taste for Western commodities. Many Maronite peasants remained just what they were under iqta'. Even if engaging in capitalist-related practices, such as working in a silk mill, it is hard to imagine how this in itself could form the basis for a Maronite to feel superior to a Druze peasant let alone a muqata'ji. Yet, the identification with the new way of life and the hierarchical view depicted by Murad was by no means just the single view of an extremist Bishop. It was a widespread feeling among most of the Maronite population. Colonel Charles Churchill, the well-known witness and contemporary of the stormy period of the 1840s and 1860s, also points out that for the Christians in general, the Druze had become 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' (1973: 105).

As I will now conclude by arguing, it is only if we capture the identity fetishism that was part and parcel of this process of racialization that we can understand why both the dark skinned and the light skinned, the poor and the rich, the educated and the uneducated Maronite could all identify themselves with European whiteness and feel superior to the hewers of wood.

Identity Fetishism and the Formation of Racial Fantasies

Following a small-scale military confrontation in 1841 leading to yet another military defeat for the Maronites, Bishop Murad wrote to France asking for its help, wondering 'whether the most advanced people of European civilization will, without pity, allow my community to be throated by barbarians and even worse kind of people. My community, whose only crime is to be invincibly attached to the faith of its forefathers... (in Attallah 1980: 184). Beside the recurrence of the racist opposition between 'the most advanced people of European civilization' and the Druze who had in five years graduated in Murad's thought from 'backward' to 'barbarians and worse kind of people', what is significant about Murad's appeal is that he locates the basis of the conflict solely ('whose only crime') in the Maronites' attachment to 'the faith of their forefathers'. Murad is certainly aware of the many socio-economic changes embodied in the Maronites' identity which reflect the practical substance of their conflict with the Druze. He is also aware of the French's awareness of this practical dimension of the crisis. Yet, he locates the roots of the conflict solely in 'the faith of the forefathers'. That is, rather than stating that the conflict is based on what being Christian has come to mean in the specific historical circumstances, he sees the Druze as attacking the Maronites for the simple fact of being Christian. It should be made immediately clear that Murad's discursive tournure is not simply the case of the category Christian playing the role of the signifier of those historical circumstances. By talking about the faith of the forefathers he gives the category a historical continuity. That is, he essentializes and dehistoricizes the category of identification, Maronite. If it is argued that the Maronites 'only crime' was to be Maronites in the same way as their forefathers, and if there is an implicit admission that the issue is about the historically articulated content of the Maronite identity, then, what is being argued is that the Maronite category of identification has the same meaning it always had throughout history. Consequently, these meanings are not seen as historical products but as an intrinsic aspect of the category of identification, Maronite. It is precisely this aspect of the process of identification that constitutes...
the fetishism of identity. The Maronites did not simply experience their identity as symbolizing the new occupations, skills, and tastes they acquired. Rather, they experienced it as their ultimate cause: it was because they were Christians that they could do what they were doing. As stated above, to stress the fetishism underlying this process of identification is to stress that it was not the product of a misinterpretation of reality. It was simply the way reality appeared to the Maronites.

In many ways, this fetishism of religious/confessional identity was ensured by the very confessional exclusivity of their experience: if those who engaged in the new practices are almost exclusively Christian, it becomes obvious that being Christian or Muslim is an important factor in establishing the kind of practices one is likely to be engaged in. To that extent, saying that one has become a silk merchant or an employee in a silk factory because one is Christian, for example, reflects a definite aspect of reality. Identity fetishism lay in the Maronites not experiencing the relational reality behind their process of identification: that the powers acquired by the Maronite identity were the product of the capitalist relations of dependency established by France and the class relations underlying it.

The permeation of religious ideology through the new social relations and the role of the Maronite Church in mediating the existence of the new practices, were important in consolidating such an experience of identity. It was through the Church’s institutions, for instance, that the Maronites learned to read and write. Furthermore, as Chevallier points out, in the nineteenth century it was still common to seal various economic associations in a church under the watchful eyes of the Holy Virgin (Chevallier 1982: 131). The role of religious ideology and the Church in the silk industry was even more pronounced and important. Sharara rightly indicates that local industry was not faced with the ‘naked arms’ of those who had nothing to sell but their labour power. Most of the labour was drawn in fact from the peasantry, which was employed on contractual basis, often through the intermediary of a religious authority (Sharara 1984: 101). Often clergymen were employed as foremen in the mills (Sharara 1975: 83). These Church practices undoubtedly reinforced the experience of the Maronite identity as the intrinsic cause of the new social practices. The physical presence of the Church (the custodian of identity) as the mediator or the supervisor of the new practices stood metonymically for the causal power of the identity itself.

However, the question with which we ended the previous section remains: how can and how does a Maronite individual experience his or her identity as causing the ‘superior’ practices that the Maronites, in general, are perceived to be engaged in when this particular individual does not have access to these practices? That is, how can this experience of identity happen across classes and across ‘skin colours’?

Here we come face to face with the magical quality of fetishized collective identification. This magic begins from the moment the individual acquires the capacity to think the collective identity: We Maronites. For one of the most enjoyable powers of the collective ‘we’ lies precisely in its capacity to make an ‘I’ experience what the ‘I’ by itself cannot possibly experience. ‘I’ can be uneducated and yet can confidently claim that ‘we are highly educated compared to the Muslims’. ‘I’ can be a peasant but can proudly boast that ‘we are a very sophisticated people’. ‘I’ can speak only in Arabic but can proudly claim ‘we have always spoken French’. Likewise ‘I’ can be poor but can note that ‘we are a rich community’. And finally in much the same way ‘I’ can be dark skinned and say ‘we are white’.

What actually happens that allows the ‘I’ to ‘get away’ with this? I would like to suggest that this can only be explained by understanding the nature of the fetishized identity as a fantasy. This fantasy is at the core of all white processes of racialization.

Let’s go in a slightly more microscopic way into the working of the racist mind that thinks something like: ‘I belong to the Christian/White/European race who are familiar with the superior occupations prevalent in Europe. The Druze/Muslims are inferior non-white people, hewers of wood.’ Now when some Maronites make such a statement, when they think ‘I belong to the race of developed superior people’, who exactly do they imagine in their mind as the ‘superior people’? The white people who are most likely to be invoked in their mind will not be a group of smelly French drunken destitutes sleeping under the bridge. When the white racists think of ‘their people’ they immediately think of those who are conceived as superior beautiful people among their people. That is, the images that dominate their imaginary are fantasy images of white people rich in economic, aesthetic, and/or cultural capital (defined according to the various conceptions of national culture); people who within their communal milieu represent the best of the best.
But with this process of ‘positive’ selection comes another necessary process: repression. The person represses precisely those images that undermine the aestheticized image invoked by thinking ‘My people are superior people.’ That is, racialized thinking requires the suppression of the unpleasant images of ‘underdeveloped’ members of one’s own group, a classification that has class at its very core. We can see that although colonial racism tried to undo class racism in favour of other biological or cultural forms of racism (see Miles 1993, particularly chapter 3; Todorov 1989), it is still haunted by the imaginary of the underdeveloped, smelly, brute underclasses, and therefore constantly works at repressing their images from the collective conception of the ‘racialized community’ even when parts of a ‘neat’ working class culture are included in the racial imaginary.

But this is not enough to understand this class imaginary of colonial racialization. For along with the positive aestheticization of the self comes the process of negatively aestheticizing the other, the one who is being racialized as interior. That is, our white colonial racists will engage in exactly the opposite process where the colonial other is concerned. When the Maronites think that the Druze are inferior people, they do not start thinking of a refined and maybe even cosmopolitan Druze muqata‘ji’s son; they start thinking of wretched people, hewers of wood, etc. That is, they invert and collapse the other into the very class images that they have banished from their definition of themselves and their white people. Likewise with skin colour: one systematically represses the whiteness of the other and the non-whiteness within the self to end up with a white self and a non-white other. I would suggest that what makes the Maronites peculiar ‘white people’ is not that they are colour-blind as opposed to European white people. It is more that they make the paradoxical all ‘we’ is constructed it is also transformed into a fantasy: something one feels entitled to aspire to. The person uttering ‘we Maronites are superior because we speak French and we are familiar with the sophisticated practices prevalent in Europe’ already sees himself or herself on the road to trying to be a superior Maronite.” The imagined ‘we’, in a kind of noblesse oblige, actually becomes causal in influencing the capacity of the person who is trying to be what their ‘we’ is. What the fetishism of identity implies is precisely the access to this causal fantasy. The internal logic of the fantasy goes something like this: ‘I am a Maronite; I can’t speak French and I am a hewer of wood; but we Maronites are superior, speak French and have access to the sophisticated practices prevalent in Europe; and since I am a Maronite I can aspire to have access to these practices prevalent in Europe, etc.; this is unlike my next door neighbour, a Druze, who like me is also a hewer of wood but he is not Maronite; as such, he is deprived of the potential that my Maronite identity gives me.’ The causality attributed to the racialized and fetishized identity is therefore conceived in terms of a potential. This is why it can act as an equalizer: not all Maronites have access to the occupations prevalent in Europe but all Maronites can potentially access them from the mere fact that they are Maronites.

It is often argued that one of the mystifications of communalism is that it blurs social divisions within the community. For Benedict Anderson, for instance, one of the reasons why nations are ‘imagined communities’ is because ‘regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship’ (1983: 16). Yet, given that inequality within a nation is obviously visible and is the subject of internal struggles, it seems necessary to explain why the feeling of ‘horizontal comradeship’ overrides the perception of ‘vertical differences’. This is what a theory of identity fetishism allows us to do. It stresses that the feeling of horizontal comradeship among so much inequality is not a simple mental emotional illusion. It has its material base in what is perhaps the only thing that a ‘community’ distributes equally among its members distribution: the ‘potential’ to be what the idealized best of the community are.

Finally, one should note that once a racialized and fetishized identity emerges, the very logic of fetishism entails that it becomes immunized from the very social conditions that gave rise to it. It is not that once the differential socio-economic conditions between the Maronites and the Druzes stop existing the Maronites’ identity is transformed once again. Rather it develops a kind of conatus of its own: a striving to persevere in its own being.

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