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Vincent Lemire’s Jérusalem 1900 reads as a manifesto and an essay. The fluidly written book tackles a heavily politicized research field in a manner which tries to go against the drain of ideologically-loaded historiographies and to give time and historicity their due.

As a manifesto, Jérusalem stands out as a defense of historical contextualization against the politicization of history. He argues against narratives that read the history of late Ottoman Jerusalem through the lens of the Arab-Zionist conflict, or through the alien eyes of uninformed tourists who would segment the place according to their own religious notions. Instead, Lemire says, Jerusalem at the turn of the twentieth century has to be thought of as a vibrant emerging city, pluralistic yet synergetic: a municipality with the strong element of civic pride that the word carries. The spatial and civil segmentation of the city is a result of British colonial policy (13) and should be studied in this context.

Therefore, the gist of his book is to argue for a municipal history of late Ottoman Jerusalem, one that would stress its civic projects, its cultural and social build-up and its political common ground: in Jerusalem, a booming city attracting migrants and foreign as well as local capital, he sees “a sort of balance within the urban community, a certain harmony among its inhabitants, at least a certain urbanity” (8). He calls Jerusalem around 1900 a “Belle époque” (9), anticipating the likely criticism that he idealizes the period. Yet the municipal focus of his book is also in keeping with his earlier study of the water supply of Jerusalem around the same period: a study which already showed the works of an active municipality.

As an essay, Lemire's work tries to catch a moment in time, which he calls “Jérusalem 1900”, an era of possibilities and modernization ahead of the clash between Arab nationalism and Zionism. He is inspired by the writings of theoreticians of temporarities and historicities such as François Hartog, Reinhard Koselleck and Georges Gurvitch, who elaborate on the difficulties inherent to understanding the past as a present that was. How does one understand late Ottoman Jerusalem without anticipating its national conflicts and divisions? He claims that studying the municipality of Jerusalem, which was instrumental in harmonizing time in the city, offers the intellectual tools to write its “truly contemporary history” (13).

The body of the book blends a synthesis of recent historiography (extending sometimes to the early 1990s) and original research about the municipality of Jerusalem.

The first three chapters investigate topics which have become points of contention between the historiographies that he criticizes, the “traditional Israeli” (16) and “Arab nationalist historians” (17) and the
“new Palestinian historians” (17) as well as their Israeli counterparts.

The first chapter aims at debunking, under the acknowledged influence of Adar Arnon, the “4 quarters” image of the Old City of Jerusalem, whose relevance to the actual social geography of Jerusalem is close to nil prior to the British occupation of Palestine.

The second chapter deals with the patrimonialization of Jerusalem under the influence of the Western tourists that began to flock to Jerusalem during the 1830s. Analyzing Western sources from Chateaubriand to Pierre Loti, Lemire explains that pilgrims, coming in growing numbers, demanded a sense of sacred geography, that was given them through the invention (in the sense Rangers and Hobsbawm have given to the word) of myriads of Christian holy places. Yet as the landscape became studded with sacred history in and around Jerusalem, the urge to check and verify elicited a Western biblical archeology which, though based on critical enquiry, was in effect a confirmative discourse for the Bible and the pilgrimages's new geography.

Chapter three deals with the sedimentation of history, and especially with the work of Maurice Halbwachs, *La Topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre sainte* (1941). This sedimentation tends to confirm the view that Jerusalem had long been a place of contested yet mingled sacredness. Halbwachs underlines the fluid religious borders around the holy places of Jerusalem, dovetailing with Lemire's view of a city whose manners and customs, while influenced by its denominational variety, were primarily intercommunal. He argues that these fluid borders were not the effect of the oblivion of the city's sacred history, as Western archaeologists thought was the case when they set out to 'discover' holy places. Rather, they were “the sign of a deep and intimate knowledge of the intrinsically syncretic roots of the main monotheistic narratives” by the “people of the Holy Land” (96-98).

The more innovative parts of the book are chapter 4 and 5, which, based on European and Ottoman archives, deal with the work of the Ottoman administration and the municipality respectively. Both the governor and the city council stand out as effective modernizing agents – but with limited financial and human resources. The action of governors and mayors and the several functions of the municipality are rehabilitated, as he describes the Jerusalem municipality as an institution guided by a sense of public interest – as understood by the city's notables. The municipality is a civic endeavor, founded before even a legal framework for all Ottoman municipalities, and it speaks to the civic sense of its inhabitants that Jerusalem became a municipality in the 1860s, long before Gaza, Hebron or Bethlehem did the same (139). Significantly, at least one other Palestinian town famous for its civic pride became a municipality nearly as early as Jerusalem: Nablus, whose municipality is claimed to date back to 1868.

Chapter 6 presents the 1908 revolution as a real moment of cross-denominational civic mobilization in Jerusalem, especially the birth of a public space supplied with an independent press and modern schools.

Chapter 7 deconstructs the notion of religious borders within Jerusalem society: while Ottoman subjects were assigned a religious belonging by birth, “denominational” institutions in Jerusalem do not appear quite so denominational, as the case of the Alliance Israélite Universelle under the direction of Albert Antébi shows. The segmentation process of Jerusalem society was a political process, not an effect of religious differences overstated by social scientists, Lemire claims.

Lemire concludes with the advent of national division across Mandatory Palestine, its impact nowadays on Jerusalem and the prospects he sees for the future of Israel/Palestine: “These are the citizens of two countries, a developing nation-state, Israel, and a nation whose state is yet to come, Palestine” (216-217). He may be acknowledging there that he is not living in nostalgic “good old days” nor an ivory tower, but in a present of our own, with its various political options on the table; yet after spending a whole book arguing against the postulate of primordial segmentation in Jerusalem, this statement sounds rather self-contradictory.

The municipal approach which Lemire sets out to explore is interesting indeed, because the municipality is both an institution encompassing Jerusalem, and a materialization of its citizenry in action. It puts Jerusalem in the 1900s in Ottoman perspective, bridging three historiographies: the Palestinian and Arab one, the Zionist then Israeli one, and Ottoman studies.
However, when he claims that “the historians” (16) have remained prisoners of Western sources and tend to consider Jerusalem as part of “a land without people” (105), without real Ottoman administration or order, he is guilty of sweeping generalizations. Who are “the historians”? When he takes to task, all along chapter 4, the historical geographer Yehoshuah Ben Aryeh, whose Jerusalem in the 19th century was first published in 1977-1979, he is targeting an outdated historiography. (The same cannot be said of the works of Ruth Kark and Michal Oren-Nordheim or of Tom Segev, whom he criticizes from the same perspective.)

Late Ottoman Jerusalem has many historians, many of whom make good use of the existing archives in Arabic, Hebrew and Ottoman, although usually not the three at the same time. They have tackled its governors (David Kushner) and its provincial administration (Haim Gerber), its religious courts (Ziad al-Madani, Kamil al-Asali), its intellectuals (Salim Tamari), its visual history (Issam Nassar), its real estate (Musa Sroor) and so forth. Lemire makes surprisingly little use of relevant resources such as the many articles that can be found in the Jerusalem Quarterly or other journals specializing in Middle Eastern history. Yet Lemire has chosen a promising subject in the municipality, which, to the best of this writer’s knowledge, has not been much studied per se.

In spite of the shortcomings mentioned here, Jérusalem 1900 is a synthetic, enjoyable entry into Jerusalem's municipal history, and one that opens a promising field of research.

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