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Hosted by Adel Iskandar

Power, Sect, and State in Syria

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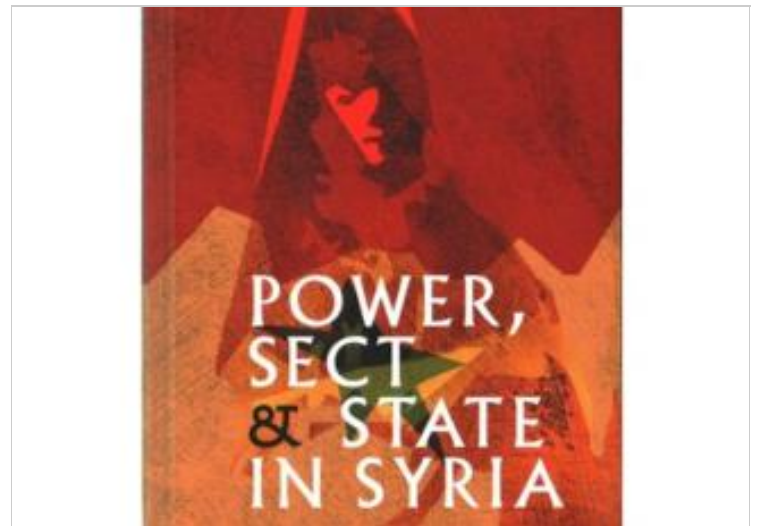
by **Marlene Schäfers**

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A. Maria A. Kastrinou, *Power, Sect and State in Syria: The Politics of Marriage and Identity amongst the Druze*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016.

How has Syria, a country that was deemed “stable” by analysts only years ago, become engulfed in an utterly brutal war? Under what circumstances does intercommunal cohesion turn into sectarian strife? Focusing on the fine line between violence and intimacy in a variety of different settings in pre-war Syria, Maria Kastrinou’s *Power, Sect and State in Syria* addresses these questions through a multifaceted ethnographic study of Syria’s Druze community, juxtaposed with an in-depth analysis of how the pre-war Syrian state governed its ethnic and religious minorities. Her work approaches marriage as a crucial rhetoric and practice for the making of sectarian and national identity in Syria and shows its centrality in state governance, specifically in the realm of cultural policy. By conceptualizing marriage as “a site of intimacy and confrontation” (xvii), Kastrinou establishes it as a fruitful conceptual lens for exploring issues of relating in pre-war Syria and compellingly mobilises the anthropological study of kinship for an investigation into the making of the political. Focusing on the ways in which intimate relations continuously tread the fine line between harmony and violence, her work powerfully illustrates how the political comes to be forged through intimate and embodied scenes of relating.



The author’s account is committed to deconstructing reified categories like “sect” or “state”; less in order to cast them aside as “mere” constructions than to investigate, within a Foucauldian conceptual framework, the historically contingent and socially situated nature of sectarian difference and national identity and to explore, on the basis of ethnographic data, the lived (and indeed often violent) reality of these notions. A preface, introduction and final chapter frame the analysis of the ethnographic material that Kastrinou collected between 2008 and 2010 and contextualise the

findings in light of the 2011 uprising and the war that followed it. The introduction moreover advances a historically grounded conceptualization of sectarianism as a specific technology of governance and representation that is inextricably linked to the rise of the modern state, rather than constituting a primordial feature of Middle Eastern societies. The remaining chapters set out to explore how sectarian identity thus constituted comes to be (re)produced, coerced and contested in Syrian intimate and public life. The book's first three chapters address this question through a detailed ethnographic account of ritual and everyday life amongst the Druze community in Jaramana, a working and middle-class suburb of Damascus. The second half of the book then moves towards considering how sectarian difference is performed and governed on the national stage, how it is negotiated in the lives of Damascene youth and, finally, how it becomes creatively adopted as an idiom of self-reflection and social critique in contemporary Syrian performance art.

The rich ethnography of the book's first half allows Kastrinou to demonstrate how life-cycle events and rituals, including births, marriages and funerals, all constitute crucial elements in the making of sectarian subjects because of the ways in which they physically and symbolically draw individual bodies into the collective body of the community. At the same time this means that the body inevitably becomes a site of struggle for the negotiation of belonging and identity. The discussion of Druze endogamy in Chapter Four brings this to the fore with particular force. By focusing on the ostracization on the part of family and community of a Druze friend who married outside the sect, Kastrinou illustrates how practices of endogamy – so central for the maintenance of sectarian boundaries – always remain at risk of being defied. Endogamy emerges from this case study as a social norm that requires, simultaneously, consent, compliance and active enforcement, and as such continuously straddles the boundary between intimacy and violence.

Chapter Five goes on to trace the ambiguity between intimacy and violence as it plays out on the level of the national. An ethnography of state-sponsored folklore festivals in Syria, the chapter provides an innovative analysis of marriage as a malleable idiom that regulates relations between the state and its citizens. Departing from the observation that most performances at folklore festivals are in fact performances of marriage rituals – generically similar yet nevertheless indicative of regional and ethnic difference – Kastrinou develops a cogent analysis of the Syrian state as what she terms a “state-of-empire” (151-153). Different from a classic nation-state, she argues, the Syrian state “does not attempt to homogenise its ethnic and religious heterogeneous make-up; on the contrary, it promotes heterogeneity and ‘difference’” (151). Her analysis of folklore festivals shows how the pre-war Syrian state indeed spent considerable efforts on nurturing and publicly celebrating ‘difference’ – a difference, however, that was embraced by the state only if framed as regional, while the pronouncement of religious or ethnic difference remained proscribed. Reified in this way, “difference” would be staged at state-sponsored festivals through a discourse of cultural harmony, allowing the Syrian state to pronounce itself towards its citizens as the necessary precondition and guardian of the harmonious coexistence of difference it worked so hard to perform.

The concept of empire allows Kastrinou to highlight the particular methods and tactics of governing difference that enabled the Syrian state to rule over its heterogeneous polity in productive contradistinction to the classic nation-state model. In her usage empire refers to an ideology and practice of governance that seeks not only to manage difference but that “renders difference possible only under its [the empire's] patronage” (152). While nation-states seek to obliterate difference, the state-of-empire as conceptualized by Kastrinou thus “aims to command difference, a difference that it itself creates as its *raison d'être* and which it controls in the name of empire” (152). Kastrinou accordingly reads the recurring performance of marriage rituals on the stages of folklore festivals as the controlled performance of such imperially nurtured and reified difference. Through such performances the Syrian state effectively stages itself as the guardian and patron of all unions within the nation, she argues, and in this way reinforces its central position as the necessary and inevitable precondition of harmonious coexistence in a heterogeneous world of difference.

A more explicit discussion of how this quasi-imperial governance of difference articulates with the enforced Arab nationalism of the Baathist regime would have been welcome at this point. Nevertheless, Kastrinou's “state-of-empire” provides a useful point of departure for conceptualizing the structures of legitimacy and coercion underpinning the Syrian state, particularly in light of the current war and the breakdown of the project of imperial harmony. As Kastrinou herself notes, the ideology of cultural harmony promoted by the Syrian “state-of-empire” effectively functioned like a self-fulfilling prophecy, according to which any challenge towards the state as the guardian of harmony inevitably has to lead to discord and rupture. In the final chapter, she applies this insight to the ongoing conflict in Syria, noting that the Syrian state is likely to continue to enjoy political and ideological legitimacy as long as the opposition forces do not find an answer to the state's vision of unity: “The fragmented nature of the opposition in Syria demonstrates that the state's myth of cultural harmony continues to define its relationship with its citizens in times of war, as well as times of peace” (232). Kastrinou's analysis thus provides one explanation to what has often been framed as the astonishing ability of the regime to cling to power even after more than five years of devastating civil war.

The last two chapters of the book continue to trace the interplay between violence and intimacy at two further

ethnographic sites. Chapter Six focuses on the politics of youth in Damascus, providing an account of how young Syrian men and women accommodate, negotiate and at times defy the authority of parents, communities and the state. Issues of marriage emerge here as a crucial point where such authority is both enacted and defied. Chapter Seven then moves on to investigate the critical appropriation of the idiom of marriage by the Syrian dance troupe *Leish* (Why). Kastrinou's analysis focuses on one of the troupe's performances, entitled *Alf Mabrouk* (Congratulations), which stages a gender-divided marriage ritual that explores the conflicts between personal desire and social obligation. In the play, endogamy is performed as a social and ritual convention that restricts bodies in their desire for others. Endogamy in this way emerges yet again as a process of boundary making where intimacy can breed violence as it forcefully restricts exogamous desires while enforcing endogamous intimacy. At the same time, the chapter also gives valuable insight into the funding mechanisms and hierarchies of the pre-war Syrian cultural scene.

The heterogeneity of the material covered by Kastrinou offers an ethnographically rich account of pre-war Syrian society, even if this compromises at times the conceptual and thematic coherence of the work. The breadth of theory that the author musters for her project is impressive, though the most central theoretical contribution of the work lies perhaps with the conceptualization of "state-as-empire" as a specific formation of power aimed at governing difference through harmony. *Power, Sect and State in Syria* thus represents an important work for anybody seeking to comprehend "the covert kinds of violence that pre-dated the current war" (3). By detailing the mechanisms that contribute to the reification of sectarian and national communities, Kastrinou opens up an innovative path for studying the governance of difference from within the intimate spaces of ritual and everyday life.

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