


BOOK REVIEW

Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon

Maya Mikdashi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022). Pp 288. \$28.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503631557

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Maya Mikdashi's *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon* examines the intertwined categories of sex, sexuality, and sect—a nexus she theorizes as “sext.” The legitimacy of the secular state in Lebanon, like elsewhere, is anchored in its commitment to religious freedom. Mikdashi argues that in Lebanon the state manages a delicate balance of power between sectarian groups through family laws that regulate gender and sexuality, from marriage to inheritance. All Lebanese people, queer or straight and Muslim or Christian men and women, are subject to both sectarian and sexual governance, a *sextarian* biopolitics for sustaining the religious boundaries that give the secular state its *raison d'être*.

This landmark ethnography contests the prevailing notion that sectarian conflict is trans-historical and an exceptional feature of Lebanese and Muslim communities, arguing that the secular state is instrumental in (re)producing sectarianism by bureaucratically regulating sexual difference. Mikdashi introduces the concept of “sextarianism” by using queer theory to extend the work of scholars like Joan Scott and Saba Mahmood, who have argued that political secularism creates distinctly modern forms of religious conflict and gender inequality. With “sext” Mikdashi theorizes the instability of gender as a concept and confronts the secular state's strategies for mediating between individual rights and communal identity as an expression of sovereignty.

The historical ethnography traces the codification of the biopolitical categories of sex and sect, or “sext,” to Lebanon's only census, conducted in 1932 under the French Mandate. Colonial secularism engendered the unstable sextarianism that underpins dangerous labels of Lebanon as a “failed state,” dangerous for making it vulnerable to foreign military and financial interventions. Mikdashi traces this instability by taking seriously the lies that Lebanese people may have told at the time: “The lies that became bureaucracy. The lies that became law” (p. 15). She emphasizes this multiplicity of narratives through an “ethnography of the archive” at the Plenary Assembly and the Court of Cassation. As she writes in the epilogue:

The Cassation Court's work performs the state's regulation and investment in all arenas of life. Nothing is personal or private. Nothing is outside the purview of the state and its highest court. Sex was a seam that held the archive together, stitching together hymens and property, voting and marriage, murder and honor, sexuality and public space, violence and intimacy, corrupt judges and politicians, rape and war, citizenship, guardianship, and bank accounts. (p. 187)

But archives are animated not only by the documents they house. They are also transformed by the interactions with those who curate them. This ethnographic approach shows that

these archives are as unstable as the sextarian categories that discipline Lebanese social relations.

Their instability amplifies, rather than mitigates, the reach of state power. Mikdashi's investigation into sextarian biopolitics culminates with the concept of the "epidermal state," introduced to theorize biomedical procedures, such as anal and hymen exams, as material practices of state power over individuals' bodies for the management of sexuality, gender, and political dissent. While biomedical examination is perhaps the most spectacular example of how the secular state claims its prerogative to reorder private life, this ethnography sheds equal light on mundane state interventions.

These interventions are both contingent and deeply embedded in the practices of everyday life. Mikdashi adapts Audra Simpson's concept of "nested" sovereignty to argue that religious courts, which handle personal status, primarily exercise sovereignty over sexual difference within different communities inside the sovereign secular state; analysis she grounds by tracing the impact of religious conversions on legal and social status within Lebanon's bureaucratic management of marriages and divorces. Secular sovereignty manifests in the process of both defining and disrupting the boundary between public and private realms.

Its sextarian logics inform even the attempts of Lebanese citizens to have a say over their own personal status, through strategic conversions, inheritance or divorce battles, feminist and queer secularist organizing, and even through their daily work in the state archive. To understand how some Lebanese people directly contest this system, Mikdashi introduces the idea of "evangelical secularism," examining how civil marriage activism and broader anti-sectarian efforts zealously champion secular culture as a remedy to religiously structured politics. These activists, including feminist and queer organizers, aspire to secular sovereignty, which obscures its role in sustaining the sectarian politics that they oppose.

Sextarianism stands out as a compelling narrative that guides readers through complex but urgent theoretical analyses. Having taught this book in both graduate and undergraduate courses, I find that Mikdashi's decision to shift the literature review and scholarly debates to the endnotes enhances its accessibility for students and wider public audiences.

This ambitious work has already sparked important discussions about the global reach of sextarianism. At the Middle East Studies Association 2022 conference, interdisciplinary scholars like Sherene Seikaly, Paul Amar, and Lara Deeb expanded on its relevance across studies of the Middle East and North Africa, global feminist and queer cultural studies, and political and legal anthropology. As Amar put it at the conference, "Mikdashi shows that queer theory is not some cute thing." Indeed, not cute at all. *Sextarianism* is as serious as the often-deadly consequences that the analytical slippages it addresses have wrought in Lebanon and elsewhere.