

Latin America, as well as those interested in Jewish subjects, will incorporate this book into their study tools, discuss it, criticise it and perhaps contradict it, thus proving its value as an unusual and original work.

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*J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* 41 (2009). doi:10.1017/S0022216X09990897

John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), pp. xii + 214, \$68.50, \$24.95 pb.

How has the identity of the so-called ‘*turcos*’ – the way Arab descendants are known in the whole of Latin America – engaged, changed and become stronger with neoliberalism in Brazil in recent decades? This is the theme of John Tofik Karam’s book, which is also available in Portuguese (*Um outro arabesco: etnicidade sírio-libanesa no Brasil neoliberal*, São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2009). As the author himself points out, the study is inspired by a combination of distinct theoretical influences, among which it is worth noting the three most relevant: the constructivist approach of the ethnic boundaries originally proposed by Barth (and used by Truzzi and Lesser in the specific case of Syrians and Lebanese in Brazil); the studies of Comaroff and Comaroff, which address the cultural forms compatible with neoliberalism; and lastly, Appadurai’s studies on growing ethnic appeal in a globalising world.

In order to develop his argument, the author discusses the following issues successively in six chapters: (1) the role the Syrian-Lebanese descendants have been taking as promoters of Brazilian exports to (other) Middle Eastern countries; (2) the attempts (unsuccessful, I believe) of some Arab politicians to fight against the link often established between Arabs and corruption by having behaved as ethical ethnic partners promoting transparency during the major scandal involving other Arab politicians in São Paulo’s City Hall in 1999; (3) the transformations of the ‘*turco*’ category within the ideology of racial democracy in Brazil; (4) marriage strategies (which are different for Christians and Muslims) and their accordance with official national migration policies; (5) the Syrian-Lebanese descendants as consumers and diffusers of Arabic cuisine in popular and refined markets; and (6) the Syrian-Lebanese descendants as consumers of homeland tourist packages that transform both the ethnic culture into a commodity and the ethnic origin into a market niche.

Methodologically, the author analyses what he himself calls the ‘marked frames of action for the public sphere’. In other words, Karam has gathered information from institutional practices such as business seminars, political celebrations, dinner banquets and heritage trips that were widely reported by different media. According to the author, Middle Easterners expend a great deal of time and energy on such gatherings, and this corroborates other authors’ findings about the importance of Syrian and Lebanese ethnic networks in promoting social mobility. Through these examples, the author develops the argument that these groups’ ethnicity was primarily devalued in earlier times but has gained greater recognition due to the neoliberal experience.

On one hand the ethnographic work is rather stimulating, but on the other hand the analysis overestimates the influence of the neoliberal regime (relatively recent in Brazil) and underestimates the effects of increased social-economical mobility, which have fully integrated the Syrian-Lebanese descendants and enabled them to attain privileged positions within the national economical, social and racial hierarchy

since the middle of the last century. Since then, to some extent, notions of racial democracy and racial mixture have been changed in order to adequately include the Arabs. In this sense, the proverb ‘Money whitens’ – referring to economically successful black people – may also be applied to Syrians and Lebanese in Brazil. In addition, analysing their increased upward mobility, it can be said that they have been on the road – and on the main track – for a long time.

Had the author chosen to make a less abrupt cut between the Arab ethnic identities before and after neoliberalism, he probably would not have felt compelled to suggest the prevalence of neoliberal initiatives since the 1970s, a time of military dictatorship and strong state economic intervention (military dictatorship ended in 1985 in Brazil, and it was only in 1990 that President Collor implemented a neoliberal economic politics). Nevertheless, it is undisputable that the book offers many examples of how Syrian and Lebanese identities could be fully expressed and recognised in Brazil, at least with regards to Arab Christians. The same has not been applied to Muslims, indicating the need for further studies that take into account the effective social representations of this group among Arab Christians and Brazilian society.

Karam succeeds in building an accurate and sensitive ethnography that captures nuances and stimulating insights into the understanding of Syrian and Lebanese ethnicity in Brazil today. It is noteworthy that the author takes full advantage of his own origins and social trajectory as an Arab-American who currently lives in Chicago but spent his childhood in Brazil since he is of Brazilian descent on the maternal side. Such cultural combination enable him to stand at an appropriate distance from some cultural traits that would seem too familiar to a Brazilian, but also to recognise what could be unfamiliar to a foreign researcher.

Finally, there is no doubt that Professor Karam’s work has encouraged a more systematic comparison with Arab-American identities in the United States that should go beyond the common consideration that, at least up to the Bush era, such identities have been strongly moulded by questionable American foreign politics.

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