

Menahem Klein, *Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 256.

by Marion Lecoquierre

Lives in Common offers a fascinating and thought-provoking insight into the past of Israel and Palestine – that of the late Ottoman rule over Palestine, of the British Mandate and the more recent past that followed the creation of the State of Israel. The book looks at the cohabitation of the Arab and Jewish population on a same territory and more specifically in the urban settings of Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron.

Klein insists on the existence of a common Arab-Jewish Palestinian identity, formed at the end of the nineteenth century around bridges incarnated by common courtyards, shared meals and holidays, but also languages learnt beyond ethnic borders, like Arabic and Ladino. The author shows that this life “in common” took different forms: after a period of actual coexistence it became, little by little, more of a forced cohabitation. This capacity to live together, entwining daily habits, cultures and traditions is shown to have slowly faded with the passing of the twentieth century, undermined by the massive influx of new Jewish immigrants of Ashkenazi origin who wished to recreate a European setting in this new land, but also by the rise of the Zionist and Palestinian nationalist ideologies. All this represented strong dividing forces that, once widely adopted by the population, separated even those who were previously sharing that common Palestinian identity. In the end, this book recounts more a story of slow division and separation, both physical and at the level of representations, than that of lives lived in common.

Published in 2014, the book offers a fascinating description of unfolding and shifting identities, always in the making, in negotiation, hinting at paths and solutions that were considered, discussed, that could have been – but never were – followed. It is a history of daily lives, cohabitation, conflicts, alliances and interests, but also of numerous political choices and strategies that made the region as it is today. Undoubtedly a remarkable piece of scholarship, the writing mixes styles and timelines in a way that can be unsettling, associating a very personal and sometimes autobiographical touch to archives, people’s memoirs, very precise anecdotes, traveling through time often in a non-linear way. At times confusing, this choice gives the book a novelistic touch that makes it not only an interesting but also an enjoyable reading.

The first part of the book, looking at past coexistence between the end of the nineteenth century and 1948 recreates the atmosphere, the “texture of life” in the three cities considered, bringing in different voices: writers, intellectuals, actors of the Jewish and Palestinian political life, weaving feelings, emotions, perceptions and historical events. These voices also introduce in a very personal, sometimes intimate way, how the rising nationalist feelings and ethnic tensions slowly imposed narratives and facts on the ground that refuted and erased this era of coexistence. The shift in the categories used by the actors themselves to represent and conceptualize their own situation and relate to each other is captivating, as are the personal and political negotiations that were involved in this evolution from an integrated Arab Palestinian identity to ethnic and religious exclusive collective consciousness.

The second part, looking at interactions between Palestinians and Israelis after 1948, gives more space to political interactions and negotiations at different scales, showing how they were also conducted locally through existing interpersonal contacts. Less grounded on the daily life and perception of the residents, it revolves mostly around the two dates that brought about drastic political changes, 1948 and 1967, concentrating on the relations of power thus created and the assertion of a strict social hierarchy between conquerors and conquered, occupier and occupied. The relations of domination, mostly in the subtext and in the making in the first part of the book, here come vividly to the fore.

One could regret that the implications of these accounts – as well as of the minor place given to Palestinian voices, justified in the prologue of the book – are not more thoroughly scrutinized. The contribution of the book could be put forth with more clarity: a discussion around the notion of “force” as a connecting factor could have been interesting, as well as a more explicit reflection around the omnipresent ideas of mixed/common space, power and separation.

The organization of the book around the two notions of place and force is indeed interesting in that it strongly resonates with the present. The central role of place (intended as the local scale, the village or the neighborhood) and the structuring role of constraint and threat, the resorting to force, remain two major axes through which one can still analyze the present interactions between Jews and Arab in the region, be it in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or within Israel proper.

It is interesting to see the impact or remanence that events and interactions evoked in these pages have today in the three cities. In Jerusalem, a city where history is seemingly everywhere, this recent past does not seem to have a major impact on the present experience of the city: the common courtyards and shared neighborhoods, the “cosmopolitan” mixed cafes, of which one of the relic is the American Colony, have largely disappeared and have been forgotten. The physical separation of the city between Israeli and Jordanian sides has been erased, with the careful unification of the “liberated” city under a unique municipality. In Hebron, on the contrary, the Jewish-Arab interactions that marked the twentieth century still shape the city, physically and symbolically: the bloodshed of 1929 and 1994 continue to be structuring events for the local communities. For some, the not so distant past when the city could be shared remains a vivid memory. In Jaffa, large parts of the old town were razed: the old city one can see today has been emptied of its Arab inhabitants and of all trace of past cohabitation, leaving a charming yet sterile scenery for tourists and art venues.

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