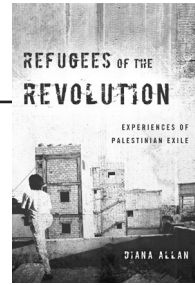


BOOK REVIEW

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Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 328 pp.

Although the literature on the Palestinian camp of Shatila in Lebanon is already vast, in *Refugees of the Revolution*, Diana Allan provides a very important and nuanced account of its political economy and the dwellers' tactics of survival and moral resilience to longstanding oppression and exile. The everyday politics of the Shatila camp dwellers, which she foregrounds throughout six chapters, goes beyond right-to-return campaigns, institutional politics, and ritual public commemorations. The past of the Palestinian refugees, for Allan, is no longer *something* given once and for all and inherited, but rather a performative and situational process. The author challenges the popular assumption that advocating for the Palestinian cause has the limited meaning of supporting the "right to return" of the families of the refugees who were expelled from 1948 onward due to the foundation of the state of Israel (the so-called *Nakba*).

In Allan's argument, it is not merely the loss of Palestinian land that undermines people's contemporary lives, but the destruction of their social fabric as well as the premature aging of young Palestinians. The Shatila camp embodies much more than a community of memory. Allan, from the introduction on, subtly contests how identity is commonly investigated through a retrospective lens, enfeebling collective memory as an efficacious explanation of the present needs and affects of Shatila's dwellers. As a result, refugee agentivity is internationally framed as merely past-oriented and past-focused, meaning that, with no resolution of their past, the refugees' present acts of resilience are rarely foregrounded. Through analysis of the camp economy of survival and subsistence, Allan shows how focusing on what I would call retrospective nationalism is ultimately

an immoral dismissal of the Palestinian cause, in that it limits the latter to a rhetoric of return and nationhood.

By identifying in camp politics one of the sources of people's tangible grievance, Allan marks the 1982 PLO's (Palestinian Liberation Organization) departure from Lebanon as the end of its armed struggle for national liberation, as well as a critical point for a Palestinian laboratory of human rights in Lebanon. In Allan's account, collective dispossession and return are still substantial components of the present condition of refugeehood, but are also well combined with an everyday economy of memory and "post-memory"¹ (Hirsch 2008)—that is, assuming the memory of earlier generations. In this regard, the first chapter engages with a critique of the international demand for commemoration, which turns into what Allan calls "historical claustrophobia" (2014:61), where Palestinians are unable to turn past memories into a solid basis for better futures.

The outsider activist's desire for a reified justice for Palestinians and what I would call an NGO-fed Nakba industry are questioned here. With a pleasantly balanced analysis of her own life in the camp and her interlocutors' experiential accounts, Allan goes far beyond the arid binary of refugee victimization and agency. She does not intend to nullify the value of testimony, but rather contends that it should be reworked towards a future-oriented perspective. The snapshots she provides of local struggles over electricity, the Palestinian performative culture of hope conveyed through sharing dream stories, and other similar mechanisms to cope with chronic uncertainty are all a checkmate to the imperative of nationalist aspirations dominating Palestinian diaspora narratives.

Nonetheless, in the second chapter, the nostalgia for the days of the Palestinian Revolution (*ayam ath-thawra*) before the 1982 departure of the PLO from Lebanon, is not abstract, but, rather, attributes greater significance to the present pragmatics of survival in the camp. Nostalgia, reconsidered as a factor validating present tactics of subsistence, leads Allan to prioritize discussions on the economic safety nets woven by the community of residents, political parties, and NGOs, in their effort to assist the community. Ethnographic examples of these daily acts of mutual indebtedness are the hospitalization and burial of the elderly Shatila resident Umm 'Ali, the attempt to heal the gastrointestinal infection of a neighbor's child, and the long-term credit and installment payments yielded by the Shatila grocer Fatima, enabling local customers to satisfy their basic needs.

In this respect, the meticulously described ethic of collective care reveals its own transformative potential of supplanting the traditional culture of “familism,” often discussed in relation to Lebanese society. Here, kinship ties are allegedly the most effective at providing solidarity and support (e.g., Fatima’s funeral costs are born by a distant cousin who is tracked down by Fatima’s landlord). The development of this collective culture of mutual care also highlights non-integrationist Lebanese state policies as well as the insufficient assistance from UNRWA (UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees), self-interested political factions, and Shatila’s Popular Committee—allegedly representing the community, but described as corrupted and infiltrated by the Syrian regime’s intelligence operatives (117). Allan shows how such political and economic neglect of the camp is also cultural, as there are no longer local associations and public meeting places. This weakens the “ethos of moral familism” which used to underlie social and political cohesion (72).

The disaffection Shatila’s residents developed towards all institutions through decades of deprivation has led to larger public contestation and steadfastness in claiming rights and benefits. In this regard, Allan mentions the regular protests in Beirut’s southern suburbs calling for electricity and equal power distribution in 2004 (127). The daily tactics of subsistence and practices of collective care explained in the chapter suggest how local assistance regimes in Shatila (primarily UNRWA) fail to offer concrete solutions while affecting individual senses of identity and of personal entitlement to welfare. While Agambean bare lives (Agamben 1998) are still subjected to local governance structures which poorly engage with the provision of services, Allan reformulates refugee subjectivity in terms of “pragmatic opportunists engaged in complex struggles to access essential resources and improve their lives” (103).

In Chapter 3, by drawing on empirical details with dexterity, Allan analyzes piracy inside the camp as a form of collective mobilization and an assertion of chronically unfilled need. On the whole, the ethnographic snapshots of the everyday camp life unravel the informal micropolitics of local power and survival. The informal tactics developed to provide electricity in the camp partially compensate for the carelessness of agencies that are supposed to mediate between the Lebanese government, the “Electricité du Liban” Lebanese power company, the Popular Committee politically representing the local community, and the material reality of the camp.

The de facto negation of needs and rights in Shatila morally justifies the decision of the camp-dwellers to resort to illegal tactics of survival.

In this section of the book, it would have been useful to find a more detailed human geography of Shatila, which is no longer a homogeneous *mukhaiyyam* (camp) for Palestinian refugees but, rather, is a *tajammu'* (slum), also absorbing low income families from migrant communities as well as chronically poor Lebanese. These demographic groups develop different practices of survival reflecting their local allegiances or inability to access welfare. Despite its longstanding ghettoization, Beirut's southern periphery encompasses areas warehousing the "unwanted" that do not generally appear on official maps and a large number of residents who are not even de jure beneficiaries of any refugee assistance regime.

In Chapter 4, Allan points out that, similar to wealth—valued as long as it is embedded in societal networks and enriching the whole community—Shatila's "dream talk" is intersubjective by nature and must be collectively constructed. The collective character of social meaning that Allan unravels in her ethnography reminds the reader of the negotiatory and social character of the later Wittgenstein's (1974) semantics. For instance, by the act of sharing oneiric narratives, the Shatila community seeks to attribute meaning to the death of Majid, a camp-dweller. This strategy has both a transformative and an evocative power with respect to empirical facts: a Bedouin resident of Shatila, Umm Yusuf, employs the interpretation of others' dreams as a "tactful intervention" to assert her own authority and affect the course of events. The performative value of dreams is also evident in the story of Umm Hadi, another Shatila resident, envisioning future life opportunities in one of her dreams and consequently deciding not to divorce her husband.

By a similar token, recognizing one's own fears and desires in others' dreams points to membership within a moral community (149). The ethical importance of dream talk in Shatila is not based on whether such dreams will come true or not; rather, it helps the community to tackle uncertainties and existential hardship in the camp. Likewise, dream talk strengthens the social ties between the dreamers and their audiences, who interpret such shared stories.

By challenging the Western-born Freudian psychology of dreams (142), Allan highlights the social significance of dreaming and sharing dream stories. Thereby, the social practice that Allan names "dream talk" is able to inform us as to how the camp-dwellers build relations to people and things.

In other words, dreams are discussed as experiences (140). Allan also emphasizes that dreams—which are seemingly beyond the “real”—actually constitute the imaginative dimension of immediate empirical reality. Imagination and social practices, therefore, appear as an inseparable dyad producing everyday experience in the camp. The mutual trust and sociality expressed by this culture of dreaming unearth Shatila’s daily politics.

While Allan problematizes how activist campaigns focused on retrospective nationalism and political resistance ended up shadowing the material circumstances in which the Palestinian refugees presently live and their future perspectives, in the current Syrian refugee crisis, however, commentators, humanitarian actors, and analysts seem to emphasize the material grievances of the refugees over their political efforts. In other words, in the fear of a new chronicization of refugeehood in the Middle East, the political source of more recent forced migrations is barely discussed, shifting the narrative from terror to trauma (Humphrey 2002).

Despite the obvious diversity of events of displacement and refugeehood, the Palestinian cause is a longstanding one, and, as such, is often depicted as the mother of all causes. Allan stresses how international empathy has simplistically foregrounded stereotyped narratives of the refugees’ lives, and, therefore, blurred their immediate needs. Obscuring either the pragmatics of everyday Palestinian politics or the metaphysics of values around return, identity, memory, and statehood would equally betray essential parts of the refugees’ agentivity. With her contribution, Allan emphasizes that empathy for the Palestinian cause ignores the extent to which the past shapes a present of suffering. By being used as a bare ideological instrument for the Palestinian cause, the past is emptied of its potential to change the political present. As a result, the ultimate possibility of forwarding worldwide support for Palestinians resides in our duty to contest such sterile forms of past-oriented commemorations (which turn out to be unable to change the present). The camp is not simply a site of political resistance, but, rather, a site of normal life that even activists still struggle to recognize as such.

In the fifth chapter, Allan provides a well-synthesized account of her Palestinian interlocutors’ perspectives on the future, the historical and legal controversies bridling the lives of Palestinians, and the refugees’ mobility networks that connect Shatila to the outside world. To my mind, the history of individual and collective mobility could have been placed earlier in the manuscript to forcefully orient our purposes of support and

solidarity towards people's futures, in which the normative identity of individuals, legally recognized by nation-states, and personal feelings of national belonging, are placed under critical scrutiny. Indeed, Allan specifies that "citizenship and nationality are not isomorphic" (188), as both of them emerge as people's individual choices.

In her last chapter, Allan reveals the under-researched Palestinian "social somatics" through which camp-dwellers express their territorial and emotional attachment (216), challenging the merely past-oriented orthodoxy of return. For Allan, *tawtin* (nationalization) and *haqq al 'awdeh* (the right to return) are much more about a return of dignity than a physical return. However, the physical return to Palestine and the need to naturalize refugees in Lebanon are not described as mutually exclusive (195). Paradoxically, the mainstream rhetoric of return is about leaving a place that has gradually become home to Palestinians—though still stubbornly defined as "host society"—and moving to a place that some "refugees" have never physically left. The political appropriation of the return rhetoric contrasts the down-to-earth image of the Palestinian activist Ahmed, shot in the stomach by an Israeli soldier in his attempt to scale a border fence during the Nakba commemoration: Allan stresses Ahmed's sense of being "injured for nothing" while being glorified as a hero by his own community.

In the conclusion, Allan reiterates that the past is not a fixed inheritance and that exile is a cumulative experience (yet, an experience to be legally recognized and properly addressed as an arbitrary exile). Similarly, Allan seems to suggest that identity and belonging should be looked at as a fluid evolutionary process. While her contribution does not concretely propose political solutions, her account of the mundane material struggles and the imaginative environments of the Shatila camp paves the way for a more conscious and reflective activism and efficacious leverage in peace negotiations and NGO funding.

Allan's focus on the present and future perspectives of refugees' lives keenly indicates that once statehood is recognized as one form of self-determination among several and nationalism is no longer emphasized as the best way of accomplishing justice, international activism will finally lose its self-consecrating attitude, becoming more responsive to people's everyday practices. Allan has insightfully suggested practical and emotional forms of achieving that. ■

Endnotes:

¹In the Lebanese novel *Bab ash-Shams* by Elias Khoury, Khalil brilliantly expresses the concept of post-memory: "We remember things we never experienced because we assume the memories of others. We pile ourselves on top of one another" (2005:139).

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