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In the aftermath of World War I the League of Nations introduced a new type of imperial control, the mandate. According to the League of Nations, mandatory powers were responsible for building government structures and guiding the mandates toward eventual self-government. In reality mandatory powers often undermined progress toward independence, leading many scholars to regard the mandatory period as a tragic gap in the evolution of national identities. In *Colonial Citizens*, Elizabeth Thompson argues that in Syria and Lebanon, both French mandates, the interwar period was critical in laying the foundations of postcolonial states and citizenship (3).

Thompson, an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia, examines the interactions of the state and citizen and how the concept of citizenship was constructed “during the process of negotiation and conflict over the civic order” (4). Of particular importance, Thompson focuses on gender as a nexus for competing groups’ claims to political power in what she calls the ‘crisis of paternity.’ Indeed, Thompson uses gender as both her primary analytical tool as well as the object of study.

In *Colonial Citizens*, Thompson characterizes the crisis of paternity as the disintegration of definitions of family and community during the interwar period (38). During World War I famine and the conscription of men into the military caused social and familial norms to be suspended. After the war, many women headed households or shared an equal burden to financially support their families, displacing men from their traditional roles as providers (26). Among urban bourgeoisie formal education of girls
became a norm, as did the entry of women into the workforce, at least until marriage. Furthermore, young urban couples married later, established households separate from their parents, and had fewer children, indicating a significant change in expected gender roles (35-37).

The crisis of paternity, however, was not limited to social changes but was also caused by the loss of political power under mandatory rule. The French positioned themselves in a paternal role over Syria and Lebanon: on the one hand, French administrators played the role of stern fathers by using force and persuasion to enforce obedience; on the other hand, France allowed the formation of parliaments based on republican rights and representation, but situated themselves as tutors to citizens who had no right to elect or dismiss them (42-44). Syrian and Lebanese men tried to assert their masculinity by reclaiming their identities as protectors of women, accusing the French of dishonorable conduct and injury to their honor (47). The French responded to these accusations by portraying themselves as better protectors of women through the creation of a welfare state that provided basic services, thus challenging Islamic manhood (Ch. 3). On both sides of the crisis of paternity women were the focus of attempts to assert paternal authority and gender provided a discourse for access to political power. Thompson uses veiling and female attendance at the cinema to illustrate this point.

Among religious groups and mediating authorities, female autonomy was correlated to the loss of state autonomy under French rule (119). When feminists, such as Zayn al-Din, claimed unveiling as a symbol of women’s access to public space and civic rights, Islamic populists prevailed upon parliamentarians and the French to treat veiling as a religious rather than state issue. Moreover, Islamic populists mounted violent attacks
on women who went in public unveiled and parliament denounced unveiling as tantamount to anarchy. The result of debates about veiling was the ascendancy of the opinion that women’s voices should not be heard in public, an opinion that persisted through independence despite France’s attempts to encourage greater rights for Syrian and Lebanese women. Indeed, the issue of veiling was framed as an ideological battle between East and West (138).

Similarly, efforts by various male groups to protect female moviegoers from corruption represented ideological turf wars between East and West (206). In Syria and Lebanon cinemas were places of entertainment, meeting places for political parties, as well as outlets for French propaganda. As such they were considered public space, which was gendered as male space. During the interwar period women began to frequent cinemas, scandalizing various religious groups. Islamic populists and Catholic groups exerted pressure on the state to censor films so that gender roles were unambiguous and to prohibit mixed-sex audiences. Like veiling, censoring of the cinema and efforts to prevent female attendance were attempts to deny women access to the civic order.

Thompson uses veiling and female moviegoing to show that female citizenship differed from that of men’s, largely due to the “gender bargains” of male groups. In both cases, gender became central to religious groups’ challenge to the French state for control of public morality and for the remasculinization of public space by marginalizing women in the civic order. Gender also represented a “site of solidarity and compromise that muted class and religious tensions” (289) by stabilizing the civic order under the French and in the early years of independence through the maintenance of rigid gender hierarchies.
In my assessment, Thompson makes an important contribution to colonial studies by challenging a historiographical trend that creates false binaries between resistors and collaborators, colonizers and colonized. The experience of mandates such as Syria and Lebanon reveal more complex interactions between the state and citizen than these binaries suggest. Indeed, Thompson points out that nationalists inevitably participated in the political order they rejected, as evidenced by their attempts to use the state to impose restrictions on female cinema attendance. Furthermore, France was unable to unilaterally impose its rule upon Syria and Lebanon and instead relied upon the remnants of the Ottoman patronage system for public order.

Thompson’s greater contribution, however, is to sub-altern and gender studies in the Middle East. Thompson illustrates the dramatic changes in women’s roles during the interwar period and gives the reader a tantalizing glimpse of a nascent feminist movement in Syria and Lebanon. In the short period before mandatory rule Syrian and Lebanese women found greater access to the public sphere than previously, only to have that access contracted by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which reified Islamic laws that emphasized gender inequality. Although many of the women mentioned remain abstract due to the lack of biographical information, Thompson’s research is an important addition to gender studies, particularly of the Middle East. If nothing else, Thompson has laid an important foundation for further scholarship and aptly demonstrates the value of using gender as an analytical tool.

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