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Leonardo Schiocchet, ed., *Entre o Velho e o Novo Mundo: A Diáspora Palestina desde o Oriente Médio à América Latina*, Chiado Editora, 2015, 530 pp., €14.00 (pbk), ISBN 9789895142415.

*Entre o Velho e o Novo Mundo: A Diáspora Palestina desde o Oriente Médio à América Latina* (“Between the Old and the New World: The Palestinian Diaspora from the Middle East to Latin America”) is a remarkable book that lends itself to being read in at least two different but complementary registers.<sup>1</sup> First, we can read the book in the way that the title most straightforwardly suggests, as a historical and sociological study of Palestinians in diaspora throughout the Middle East and Latin America. Most of the essays in this edited volume are devoted to describing the experience of Palestinians within a particular nation, giving special emphasis to their political status and aspirations, their economic conditions, and their cultural achievements. The essays in Part One of the book focus on the Middle East, describing the various Palestinian communities that emerged in the wake of the Nakba, while the essays in Part Two focus on the very different communities that developed in Latin America, which were formed originally by Christian Palestinians seeking economic opportunities and looking to escape religious persecution in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Taken individually, each of these essays is highly informative; this is especially true of the second half of the book, as Palestinian communities in Latin America have received relatively little scholarly attention. Taken together, though, the essays initially seem somewhat disjointed. It is not immediately obvious, for example, why the Middle Eastern and Latin American communities are treated together in the same book, given that their historical, social, political, and economic experiences have shared so little in common. And even within each of the two parts of the book, the relations between the different national communities are not developed in much detail, leaving the reader with a somewhat fragmented understanding of the Palestinian diaspora. But this initial impression is somewhat misleading, for across the two parts of the book one discovers a number of resonances that suggest a second way of reading the book, one that could be characterized as broadly philosophical. Taken together, the essays yield valuable insights on the fragile, contingent, and recognition-dependent nature of group and individual identity. On the one hand, they demonstrate beyond any doubt that Palestinianness is a salient feature in the self-understandings of people whose life experiences are widely diverse. As Leonardo Schiocchet suggests in his introduction, then, the book as a whole can be read as a refutation of Golda Meir’s oft-quoted claim that “there is no such thing as a Palestinian people” (10). But on the

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<sup>1</sup> The book is written in Portuguese. All translations in this review are my own unless otherwise indicated.

other hand, the essays also draw our attention to the ways in which the meaning of Palestinianness is not simply given: it is sharply contested by the people who share that identity and as a result it is subject to continuous, open-ended reinterpretation. In what follows I will focus primarily on these issues of Palestinian identity, but it will be impossible to do this without also referring to the more historical and sociological dimensions of the book. I will treat the two major parts of the book separately, as their contributions to our understanding of Palestinian identity, and of identity in general, are importantly different.

1.

One of the most important themes that run through the essays devoted to Palestinians in the Middle East is that of invisibilization. This theme is reflected clearly in the titles of the first two contributions: “Fazendo Palestinos Desaparecer: Um Projecto Colonialista” (“Making Palestinians Disappear: A Colonialist Project”) by activist and anthropologist Rosemary Sayigh, and “Refutando Invisibilidade: Documentação e Memorialização de Refugiados Palestinos” (“Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims”) by Ilana Feldman.<sup>2</sup> According to Sayigh, we can understand the invisibilization of the Palestinians best not by treating “the Palestinian question” as *sui generis*—as having taken shape, for example, against the background of the Shoah or as resulting from the remarkable fact that the territory in dispute is a holy land for Jews, Christians, and Muslims—but rather by viewing it as yet another application of the strategies of colonization that had been developed by the Spanish and the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and that had been put into practice by European powers ever since. Just as Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda had justified Spanish colonization of the Americas by characterizing Native Americans as barbarians and as natural slaves, so early Zionists tended to justify the appropriation of Palestine by characterizing its inhabitants as “uncivilized, primitive, and incapable of ‘modern’ economic productivity” (55). And more recently the view has become widespread among defenders of Israel that “Arabs only know the language of force.” These sorts of characterizations present the Palestinians as either unable or unwilling to engage in rational, good faith dialogue, thereby helping to neutralize in advance the persuasive force of any claims they might make against the colonizers, including the claim to be recognized as a people. With their expulsion from Mandatory Palestine and with the creation of the state of Israel, Palestinians were transformed from “citizens-in-becoming of a sovereign state to the state of ‘Arab refugees,’ dependent on humanitarian aid for their survival, deprived of their specific cultural and historical heritage and thus of their peoplehood” (67). In the following chapter, Ilana Feldman describes some of the ways in which Palestinians have attempted to make themselves visible, making use of the few resources available to them to narrate their own histories and to demand recognition of the Palestinians as a people. Many Palestinians, for example, still own the keys to the homes they were forced to abandon in Palestine. They show these keys to visitors and display enlarged replicas of them at demonstrations, rendering visible their hope and their demand for the right to return (96). Likewise, Palestinians hung Palestinian flags in public places, which had been forbidden by the Israeli government prior to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. This gesture gave visible expression to the demands not just of individual Palestinians, but of the Palestinian people as a whole, considered explicitly as a national group (97). By means of these sorts of visibility

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<sup>2</sup> The latter essay was published originally, in English, in *Journal of Refugee Studies* vol. 21, no. 4 (2008): 498-516. The title given in parentheses is its original title.

practices, Palestinians refused absorption into the broader category of “refugees,” demanding recognition rather as *Palestinian* refugees, as members of a distinct national group fully deserving of its own independent state (89).

Although neither author does so explicitly, I believe we can understand the phenomenon that both are describing in terms of the concepts of invisibility and recognition as these are articulated by Axel Honneth and other contemporary critical theorists. To say that a person has been rendered invisible, according to Honneth, is not to say that the person is literally unperceived. It is to say, rather, that she is cognized but not recognized, and thus that she is treated as someone who is physically present but lacking in “social validity.”<sup>3</sup> To recognize another person as socially valid is to undergo a kind of decentering by which one comes to view her as a legitimate addressor of moral claims and to view oneself as obligated not to engage with her purely strategically and with reference to one’s own inclinations. The strategies of colonization deployed against the Palestinians can be seen as ways of refusing them this kind of recognition. Their claims, both as individuals and as a people, against the state of Israel are neutralized in advance by their having been rendered socially invisible.

How can Palestinians resist this kind of invisibilization? This is the primary question that the other essays in Part One address. As the essays make clear, though, there are in fact two distinct questions here. First, what can Palestinians do to persuade or to force Israel and the world community to recognize them? And second, what can Palestinians do in order to retain their sense of themselves as socially valid, as deserving of being taken seriously as “self-originating sources of valid claims?”<sup>4</sup> The essays in Part One focus for the most part on the latter question. In her chapter “O Movimento pelo Direito de Retorno na Síria: Construindo a Cultura de Retorno, Mobilizando Memórias para o Retorno” (“The Right of Return Movement in Syria: Building a Culture of Return, Mobilizing Memories for the Return”), Anaheed Al-Hardan describes the strategies employed by Palestinians in Syria to ensure that younger generations appreciate the importance of the right of return.<sup>5</sup> The Right of Return Movement (RoRM) emerged in response to the Oslo Accords and to the threat they posed to refugees’ legally recognized right to return to the land from which they had been expelled (142-143). RoRM activists have been especially concerned to help foster a culture of return among younger Palestinian refugees who have no direct memory of the Nakba and who never had the sense that their return to Palestine was imminent. They have attempted to combat refugees’ forgetting of their Palestinian identity and of the legitimacy of their national claims by collecting and distributing oral histories of older Palestinians who had lived through the Nakba. In “Pintores de Beddawi: Entre Criação Artística e Engajamento Político” (“Painters of Beddawi: Between Artistic Creation and Political Engagement”), Amanda Dias shows how refugees in Lebanon have used art to perform a similar function. Painters in the Beddawi refugee camp have attempted to “render visible, and at the same time create and reinforce, the histories and beliefs” of the refugees by helping to produce a “collective imaginary” in which they could recognize themselves and their social validity (218). At great expense to themselves, and with little hope of gaining wider artistic recognition, these painters have devoted themselves to producing politically engaged and straightforwardly didactic works of art, full of symbolic representations of

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<sup>3</sup> Axel Honneth, “I—Axel Honneth: Invisibility: On the Epistemology of ‘Recognition,’” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 75, no. 1 (2001): 120.

<sup>4</sup> John Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 543.

<sup>5</sup> This essay was published originally, in English, in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 2 (2012): 62-79. The title given in parentheses is its original title.

Palestinian suffering and resistance. Some of these works are intended for an international audience, and so they emphasize more broadly humanistic, less specifically Palestinian themes, while other works, including large murals within the Beddawi camp, are meant to express very explicitly the political demands of the Palestinian people. Both of these practices—RoRM’s collection of oral histories and the Beddawi painters’ production of politically engaged art—helped to combat the invisibilization of Palestinians, presenting them to the world, and just as importantly to themselves, as socially valid and as deserving of recognition as individuals and as a people.

## 2.

The essays in the second part of the book complicate the picture suggested by the essays in the first part. For Palestinians resisting invisibilization in the Middle East, there was relatively little doubt about the identity that had been invisibilized or about the claims for which they were demanding recognition: the most salient features of Palestinianness were the experience of the Nakba and the claimed right of return. But this was not the case for Palestinians who had immigrated to Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These immigrants were predominantly Greek Orthodox Christians. They fled Palestine in order to pursue economic opportunity and later to avoid conscription into the Ottoman army, where they feared they would be used as cannon fodder. These Palestinians faced ethnic discrimination in all the countries to which they had immigrated, but they also enjoyed considerable economic success, at first primarily as door-to-door salespersons. By the middle of the twentieth century the descendants of the first waves of immigrants had become well integrated into their societies: they played valuable roles in their economies, communicated with others and with themselves primarily in Spanish or Portuguese, and converted in large numbers to Roman Catholicism.

Because of their very different circumstances, refugees in the Middle East and immigrants to Latin America could not possibly have had the same understanding of Palestinianness. As Denys Cuche shows in his chapter “Os Palestinos de Peru: Uma Forte Identificação com a Palestina” (“The Palestinians of Peru: A Strong Identification with Palestine”), many Palestinians in Peru were very uncomfortable with the discourse of Palestinian nationalism, and especially with its constant reference to the Nakba, which had the effect of minimizing the role of earlier Christian emigrants in the formation of Palestinian identity (279). And in her essay “Árabes Estabelecidos e Refugiados Palestinos Recém-Chegados ao Brasil: Tensões Referentes ao ‘Direito de Retorno’ e a uma ‘Pedagogia de Ascensão Social’” (“Established Arabs and Recent Palestinian Refugees to Brazil: Tensions Concerning the ‘Right of Return’ and a ‘Pedagogy of Social Ascension’”), Sônia Cristina Hamid shows how the idea of the right of return functioned to drive a wedge between older, more established Palestinian immigrants and the Palestinian refugees who had been displaced by the Second Gulf War in Iraq. Specifically, the more established immigrants opposed the resettlement in Brazil of the refugees from Iraq on the grounds that it would contribute toward undermining the latter’s claim of a right to return to the lands from which they had been unlawfully expelled (454). Many, of course, viewed the established immigrants’ position as self-serving: they were willing to sacrifice the well being of other Palestinians in order to score a cheap political point, and in doing so they were able to avoid associating themselves with a group of people who would, for the time being at least, be less economically and socially successful (458). Both of these cases show very clearly that no aspect of Palestinian identity can be taken as simply given.

The other essays in Part Two do an excellent job of showing how Palestinian identity in Latin America was constantly constructed and reconstructed by a kind of bricolage, responding to circumstances within the various Latin American states as well as to international events. For example, in “O ‘Refúgio’ e o ‘Retorno’ Entre os Palestinos do Chile: Narrativa Identitária e Discurso Militante” (“The ‘Refugee’ and ‘Return’ Among the Palestinians of Chile: Narrative of Identity and Militant Discourse”), Cecilia Baeza describes the way in which earlier Palestinian immigrants came to conceive of themselves in contrast to the Ottoman Turks. Throughout Latin America, these immigrants were referred to as *turcos*, since their homeland had been a part of the Ottoman Empire. This officially sanctioned misrecognition frustrated the Palestinians, who had fled to Latin America precisely in order to avoid being oppressed by the Turks. Or at least this is the story the Palestinians liked to tell. Baeza suggests that this narrative of Turkish oppression, and specifically of religious persecution within the Ottoman army, “was more imaginary than real” (302). True or not, though, this self-understanding helped Latin American Palestinians to identify with Palestinians in the Middle East, integrating their own narrative into a larger Palestinian narrative focusing on their people’s long history of being uprooted from their native lands (304). Baeza also describes the way in which the Second Intifada contributed toward forging a common identity: many Chileans of Palestinian origin experienced the uprising as a spur to reaffirm and reconnect with their Palestinian heritage. When these Chileans attempted to visit Palestine as tourists, they were often treated harshly by the Israeli government. This experience helped them to identify, at least to some degree, with the lives of Palestinians in the Middle East. Similarly, Silvia Montenegro and Damián Setton show in their chapter, “A ‘Diáspora Palestina’ na Argentina: Militância para além da Etnicidade” (“The ‘Palestinian Diaspora’ in Argentina: Militancy Beyond Ethnicity”), how a common Palestinian identity was constructed on the basis of an analogy between the state of Israel and the military dictatorship that ruled in Argentina from 1976 to 1983. Again, Palestinians in Latin America and in the Middle East could understand themselves in terms of a shared experience of oppression perpetrated by the states to whose rule they were subjected against their wills. Both of these essays bring out very nicely the irreducible contingency and context-dependence of Palestinian identity.

### 3.

As I hope to have shown, *Entre o Velho e o Novo Mundo* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the Palestinian diaspora and of the ways in which Palestinians have worked both to construct and to gain recognition for their collective identity. The book will be valuable to anyone who is interested to learn about the history of Palestinian communities in the Middle East and in Latin America. Every one of the contributions is written in a straightforward style, with a minimum of jargon, and so they will be accessible to motivated undergraduate students in Middle East Studies, History, Political Science, Sociology, and Philosophy. They will also be valuable to specialists in these fields. For all of these reasons, I recommend the book highly.

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