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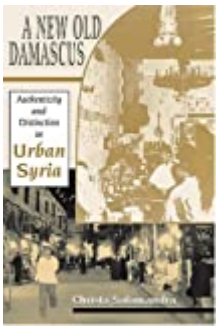

Christa Salamandra. *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004. x + 199 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21722-6; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34467-0.

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Christa Salamandra's *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* is a thought-provoking analysis of one segment of the Syrian elite's attempt to reaffirm its upper-class status through consumption and, to a lesser degree, the preservation of Old Damascus. It is of special interest to any scholar concerned with the interrelated issues of collective identity (both class and "national") construction and the physical/rhetorical configuration of urban space.

In addition to a meticulous and enticing description of Damascus, old and new, Salamandra offers a compelling analysis of the socio-spatial changes that have taken place in Old Damascus since the Ba'th party's seizure of power in 1963 as well as more recent economic liberalization measures. One of Salamandra's essential arguments is that Damascus's older elites are reclaiming the Old City as a site of consumption rather than one of residence and that these elites are motivated, first and foremost, by a desire to reaffirm and maintain their perceived status.

Salamandra calls these elites "Damascenes," a term that does not designate all residents of Damascus. In fact, most "Damascenes" are members of old notable or bourgeois families who once resided in the Old City and wielded considerable political power. Attracted by the promises and comforts of modernity, they began to leave the Old City for Western-style homes and apartments in newer areas of Damascus soon after Syria acquired independence. During the same period, increasing numbers of Syrians were leaving their smaller towns and villages in the countryside for the capital, where many occupied Old City homes vacated by the Damascenes. However, in the 1980s and 1990s the Old City's original inhabitants began to express a renewed interest in Old Damascus. Some converted their former homes into restaurants and cafes whose architectural style, food, and ambiance were designed to recreate an "authentic" Damascene atmosphere. As Salamandra demonstrates, this "return to the old" is–upon closer inspection–an amalgam of old and new, Eastern and Western, local and global.

The fact that the Old City of Damascus has become a locus of Damascene elite consumption and identity affirmation is not due exclusively to economic changes in Syria. The Old City symbolizes a particular past, one prior to the Ba'thist era when the Damascenes held the reigns of political and economic power. Thus, the Damascene elite's interest in the Old City also signifies their enactment of social identity through the "preservation" of an idealized vision of the past. Salamandra devotes attention to the most prominent manifestation of this

phenomenon, the "Friends of Damascus," an organization whose core membership is "Damascenes" who have been at the center of efforts to halt the Syrian government's further destruction of Old Damascus. Salamandra also addresses the Syrian government's parallel efforts to co-opt the Old City for its own identity project–albeit of a different nature. Aiming to reinforce its secular ideology of a homogeneous Syria that belongs to all, the Syrian state draws on representations of the Old City as "tradition," in other words, the authentically Syrian. Thus, television series whose setting is historic Damascus have become sites of contestation, vehicles through which the Syrian state and the Syrian old elite present alternative portrayals of the Old City's "authentic" past, a process that is rich with implications about the present.

Salamandra further argues that part of what motivates the Damascene elite's attempt to reclaim the Old City through consumption is a desire to differentiate themselves from the nouveaux riches who attempt to enact their upper-class status through association with the Old City and the Damascenes seeking to preserve it. She sees her work as a departure from previous studies that treat consumption and identity as modes of resistance to state dominance. Thus, she argues for an understanding of the state as but one of many actors who challenge "one another over various representations of past and present, of culture and history, that range from bodily adornment and family honor to theme restaurants and television dramas" (p. 19). That said, the Damascene elite and the Syrian state appear to be the two most significant actors engaged in identity construction and contestation in relation to the Old City. By emphasizing their particular connection to the Old City, Damascenes thwart the government's attempt to appropriate Old Damascus for its particular presentation of national heritage, and by campaigning for the preservation of structures displaying older architectural styles, they obstruct the government's efforts to make the Old City more open and legible. The Damascene elite that Salamandra describes also appear to be differentiating themselves from Alawis of rural origin, many of whom now live in the Old City and who are seen as representatives of those currently holding the reigns of political power in Syria. Salamandra's claim of viewing the state as but one of many actors involved in identity construction and contestation would have been stronger had she focused more on non-state actors like the working classes now living in the Old City and the Syrian nouveaux riches. She could have said more on these actors' own relationship with the Old City, and the kinds of identities they attempt to enact through this relationship.

Finally, Salamandra argues that in the current atmosphere of competitive consumption in Damascus, women are central to the elites' contest over position and prestige. According to Salamandra, in a society where the appearance of chastity is an important indicator of a woman's integrity, and where interaction between unmarried women and men is frowned upon, women's adornment of their bodies is a way of displaying social status to potential husbands or their females relatives who frequently play a critical role in the search for a suitable bride. Even after marriage, the author argues, women continue to use bodily adornment to demonstrate their social status. Salamandra places these practices by upper-class women within the context of an elite patriarchal society, one in which, ultimately, woman are objects of display in a competition for social status that is governed by men. Such arguments raise certain questions. One wonders, for example, precisely where to locate author, poet, and assembly member Collette Khoury, and author and political activist Siham Tergeman. These two Damascene women appear to play leading roles in terms of campaigning for the preservation of the Old City and defending the Old City's idealized past. Are they exceptions to the aforementioned rule or do they symbolize a more complex aspect of the patriarchal society in which they live?

These few questions and criticisms aside, Salamandra's book presents a compelling analysis that sheds light on the socio-spatial relations prevailing in Old Damascus and gives the reader a rare glimpse into the lives of upper-class Syrians.