

National Consumer Culture in a Comparative Perspective: The Case of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin on the Eve of the Great Depression

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In his pioneering collection *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550 – 1922*, Donald Quataert observes that “consumption studies can help to disentangle modernization from Westernization, and place the Middle East society closer to the center of attention. Societies have constructed social values around goods for centuries ... Consumption studies may be most important for the fundamental question that it poses about the role of goods in shaping and reflecting political, economic, social and cultural behavior” (2000, p. 12).

Based on the 1930 Guide Book for merchants in the Mediterranean basin, which is replete with surveys of local firms operating in the diverse geopolitical units, this paper seeks to paint a macro-picture of consumerism in the eastern corner of the Mediterranean on the eve of the Great Depression. Comprised of succession states formerly part of the Ottoman Empire at different stages in the process of formation—Lebanon under the French Mandate, Greece, Turkey, British Mandatory Palestine, and Egypt—this region shares a common history of centuries under Ottoman rule. France, Britain, and Italy—west Mediterranean nations with advanced Western economies also covered by the Guide Book—served as the control group. The proposed paper is based on an interdisciplinary social-economic empirical research examining the historical development of consumer practices in relation to the proliferation of “objects” associated with the fostering of “sociability” in the eastern Mediterranean basin on the eve of the Great Depression.

Herein, I explore the link between the consumption of diverse material and non-material goods—including mass observation of films, popular forms of recreation, financial services (insurance)—and desire and sociability. Relating to owners of businesses, firms, and companies as agents of a historical process that gave birth to a local and regional consumer culture, I also discuss whether their ethnic-national origin affected the consumption of goods. To date, consumer culture in late Ottoman society has generally been examined via a specific industry—Frierson (2000) looking at the fashion industry, Jirousek (2000) analyzing the transition to a mass-fashion system and Kupferschmidt (2007) investigating European department stores and Middle Eastern consumers in relation to the changes in commercial patterns. In contrast to these, I shall endeavour to provide a multidimensional outline of the goods and services associated with national and international socialization processes in a region composed of new national entities, focusing primarily on the central cities therein.