

Asceticism vs. Consumerism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Image vs. Reality: Consumer Culture and Zionist Ideology in Interwar Palestine

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Abstract

Most nationalist ideologies in the interwar era were informed by ascetic ideas that were diametrically opposed to the emerging ‘hedonist’ consumer culture. Zionist thought and practice emphasized the ideal of the ascetic pioneer, mainly as a response to the anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish cosmopolitanism, urban rootlessness, and non-productivity.

Nonetheless, Interwar Palestine witnessed the rapid growth of a Jewish consumer society, thanks to the accelerated processes of urbanization and industrialization that came in the wake of the British takeover of the country in World War I and the subsequent immigration of middle-class Jews. As a result, the public culture in the Jewish sector of Palestine in those decades was preoccupied with the image of the typical consumer and its relationship with the ideal citizen, within the framework of nation-building.

Drawing on archival and media sources, the paper will juxtapose visual representations of the Jewish consumer with descriptions of actual market situation in Interwar Palestine and reveal the gendered dimension of the tension between pioneer and consumer. In commercial advertisements and promotions of nationally responsible consumption (“buy national/Jewish”), the typical consumer was portrayed, textually and visually, as a middle-class woman, a mother and a homemaker, of European origins, interested in rationalizing her domestic management and use of time. This picture omitted middle-class males and lower-class women, immigrants from places other than Europe, and pioneer men and women. This omission served the masculine nature of Zionist ideology of productivity, manifested in an image of a gendered division of labor in which men produce and women consume.

This ideology, however, was not the reality. Various accounts of marketplace behavior, found in the media, institutional correspondence, memoirs, and oral history sources, reveal a different picture. Although men were rarely presented as the typical consumer, in fact they were active consumers—not only for “masculine” products like motor vehicles and construction materials, but also for domestic goods like food, children’s toys, and the like—both “necessities” and “luxuries.” This was true, and more strongly, for the purchasing agents of rural communal settlements, who came to the city to shop for their villages, and most of whom were men. The market was essentially a mixed-gender venue. Nationalist ideology could perhaps overlook the world of letters and visual culture, but not the actual marketplace, where men often consumed (and women produced).