Chapter 12

Transforming a Late-Ottoman Port-City
Salonica, 1876–1912

Sotirios Dimitriadis*

On September 15, 1881, Faros tis Makedonias [the Beacon of Macedonia] published an open letter to the Ottoman authorities of the port of Salonica (Greek: Thessaloniki, Turkish: Selanik). Faros, the only private Greek newspaper in the city at the time, decried the spread of prostitution in Salonica, and especially in the area surrounding the harbor. Only recently, a brothel named Alcazar de Salonico had opened its doors “on the most central square” of the quarter, and its matrons caused “the most scandalous scenes.” This “den of orgies” was the first sight that greeted the sailors and passengers who disembarked from incoming ships. The prostitutes had become bold enough to accost an international contingent of military officers, who had just arrived to the city from Thessaly, where they had been observing the demarcation of the new Greek-Ottoman border. The newspaper called on the local police and the Ottoman governor to intervene and protect the public by revoking the brothel’s license.\(^1\) The concerns of the newspaper went beyond prostitution. In the course of a month following the piece on Alcazar, Faros published complaints about the activities of unregistered medical practitioners,\(^2\) the failure of the municipal authorities to keep the city clean,\(^3\) and the streets being constantly blocked by construction workers going about their business.\(^4\) Its campaign claimed a first success when the authorities announced the shutting down of Alcazar and the removal of all prostitutes from the city.\(^5\)

This vignette paints late Ottoman Salonica as a site that was contested by a number of discourses and practices. The criticisms highlighted above reveal the presence of a normative discourse with some very clear notions on which

---

* School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

1 Faros tis Makedonias 596, September 3/15, 1881. Note that the newspaper is dated in the Julian calendar.

2 Faros 600, September 12/24, 1881.

3 Faros 601, September 15/27, 1881.

4 Faros 606, September 26/October 8, 1881.

5 Faros 596, September 3/15, 1881. Thessaly, an Ottoman province, was eventually ceded to Greece in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–8 and the Treaty of Berlin (1878).
activities were permissible in urban space and which were not, or at least not in clear view. Significantly, these opinions were consistently articulated as self-evident, part of a universal model on the structuring and regulation of the contemporary city. Visiting Europeans, such as the military officers already mentioned, acted as witnesses to the measure of conformity to these norms, and failure to adhere to them would have implications for the reputation of the city. Such dispositions were not confined to Faros and the nascent local press, but had a significant impact on the planning and actions taken by the Ottoman authorities.

Such deliberations proved crucial, but were only part of the broader evolution of Salonica during the last third of the nineteenth century. During this period, the city emerged as one of the biggest ports in the Ottoman Empire, comparable to other port-cities throughout the Mediterranean, such as Alexandria, Izmir, and Beirut (and sharing common elements with Trieste, Odessa, or Istanbul). Salonica and the other port-cities developed as a result of wide-ranging processes that defined this period. In these port-cities, the expanding world-system, based on market relations, could find access to the insular agricultural economies of the Balkan or Middle Eastern hinterlands. The European powers competed with each other for economic and diplomatic influence and against the attempts of native states to resist foreign encroachment through military and administrative reform. Public and domestic life, as well as patterns of consumption and sociability, was increasingly modeled after the West, and especially France. The cityscape was radically transformed, influenced by the policies of the central state and its local representatives, initiatives taken by local communities and individuals, and the contingencies of economic and demographic growth. The imperial societies, with their diverse populations and hierarchical orders, were confronted with new political ideologies (liberalism, nationalism, socialism), resulting in tensions that would eventually undermine the social order.

This article will locate the transformation of late Ottoman Salonica within the interplay between European influences, the initiatives taken by the Ottoman state and its local representatives, and the emergence of a new set of local elite actors. It will chart this transformation on the level where it was most evident, that of urban space—a concept that includes changes in the actual cityscape; the way in which the transformed spaces were experienced

---

6 Conversely, the views of prostitutes, construction workers and practical doctors were never articulated within a single discourse. Their frequent evocation, even as straw men, in the press, however, proved the resilience of practices that were incompatible with the urban order envisioned by the local elite, but arguably still constituted part of the “modern” city.