CHAPTER 6

European Fashion, Consumption Patterns, and Intercommunal Relations in the 19th-Century Ottoman Istanbul

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The contribution of western historiography to the study of fashion and its transformations has been particularly stimulating. Initial forays into the history of clothing, which were largely limited to descriptive or aesthetic analyses, were followed by studies in which several authors have opened new perspectives in this area of research: by analyzing the social dimension of clothing and by emphasizing the interaction between fashion and culture, they have also problematized the shape of the body itself.¹ In contrast, however, it was not until recently that researchers have become interested in the social history of Ottoman clothing and fashion.²


Considering that the history of clothing is an integral part of the history of everyday life, this chapter will analyze clothing as a code for reading and understanding Ottoman society and as a methodological tool that can break the boundaries between micro- and macro-history, and between the private and the public. The genesis of fashion is in and of itself one of the most striking signs of the radical transformation of society. Social changes and changes in fashion go hand in hand. To reflect on the history of clothing and its transformations means not only to go directly to the heart of the social and cultural history of the Ottoman Empire but also to study the process of the transformation of Ottoman society from another point of view, different from the most commonly-envisioned administrative and political perspectives.

The period covered in this chapter is roughly that of the 19th century and extends from the Tanzimat reforms—when the Ottoman Empire embarked on a program of modernizing reforms along European lines—to the late 19th century. The radical impact of these economic, political, urban, social and cultural changes affected both the private and public spheres.

This chapter centres on the Ottoman capital, Istanbul, which is a natural choice: economically and politically, demographically and spatially, it was unique among Ottoman cities; astride the Bosphorus, it opened to the Sea of Marmara, to the port cities bordering the Aegean, and to the West beyond; last but not least, commercial and cosmopolitan, 19th century Istanbul was greatly impacted by western lifestyles and it remained the principal forum for communication and exchange between the Empire and the outside world. Moreover, the city boasted a strong European presence, particularly in the districts of Galata and Pera, where Levantines, together with non-Muslim populations, played a key role in the modernization of manners by maintaining close relations with Europe, in addition to their well-established diasporas in the Mediterranean and central and western Europe.

The transformative value of clothing is important for several reasons. A profound analysis of fashion juxtaposes, on the one hand, social and professional hierarchies (elites, middle, and lower classes) and, on the other hand, ethnic and religious groups (Muslims of various origins, Greeks, Armenians, Jews and various other European groups). This analysis will focus on the relations

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3 The reform period known as Tanzimat began on 3 November 1839 with the issuing of the imperial edict of *Gülhane*, the manifestation of a deliberate political will to transform and modernize the Ottoman Empire according to the example of European countries.