

When the Clock Strikes Sunset: the Politics of Time in the Late Ottoman Empire

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The end of modern capitalism is nigh. As the distinction between work and leisure is blurred under the condition of late capitalism, enabled by recent technological developments and the increasing mobility of labour, we find ourselves in a moment of temporal ambiguity and at a loss for sleep. The late nineteenth-century was a similar time of confusion for residents of urban Ottoman Istanbul with the recent introduction and implementation of European (Greenwich) mean time. The turn of the century saw a negotiation between “alla Turca” or religious local apparent time and “alla Franca” Greenwich Mean Time physically manifested in the four clock towers built throughout the nineteenth century in Istanbul. An exploration of how these clock towers governed public space and the

material experience of everyday life through maps, archival photographs and newspaper articles of the period shows that, contrary to the dominant interpretation in the literature, the clock towers were not proponents of secularisation and Westernisation. The clock towers depended on employees of nearby mosques for their calibration and were always built in conjunction with existing mosques, forming religio-temporal complexes that aided in Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s project of religious self-legitimation. The material experience of everyday life created by these clock towers puts to test the Benjaminian notion of clock-time as “homogenous and empty” and gestures toward the possibility of multiple alternative, localised, non-homogenous and non-empty understandings of time.