Tulips and coffee, leisure and lifestyle in an Ottoman perspective. Title and subtitle of this collection of articles raise expectations which the volume itself can meet only partially. It contains six papers presented by a group of young scholars at a larger conference entitled „Rethinking culture in the Ottoman eighteenth century“ that took place in Princeton in 2005. The articles, however, are connected more by their revisionist stand than by exploring the potentials of a culturalist approach to Ottoman history. It is symptomatic that the editor chooses to address, „by way of introduction“, the paradigm of decline and its history in Ottoman studies rather than to outline the characteristics of what is called here „the new field of Ottoman cultural history“ (p. 2).

In a detailed overview, Dana Sajdi revisits the discursive construction and deconstruction of the notion of decline in the historiography of the Ottoman empire which is still very much in evidence outside the narrow circles of specialists. For the latter, the usefulness of this exercise is probably limited, but one can hope that the former might take notice, more so now than in 1999 when Amy Singer stated „those who persist ... do so out of sheer laziness“ (p. 1).

Can Erimtan’s article opens the volume with an appeal to rethink the characterization of the so-called Tulip Age (1718–1730) as „a short-lived but highly productive era of Westernization during Damad Ibrahim Paşa’s tenure as ... grand vizier“ (pp. 42–43). Erimtan explores the contested perceptions of the Saadabad summer palace, situated outside the city walls of Istanbul, a building which has long vanished without leaving a trace. The void can be filled with descriptions from various perspectives. Erimtan posits that whereas former scholarship saw the construction as influenced by recent views of Versailles and Fontainebleau, „the Ottoman empire had at the time not necessarily been looking westward for inspiration“ (p. 43), that, on the contrary, the palace is following models from Safavid Iran, Mughal India or other regions of the Islamic world. A meticulous investigation of the meta-narratives of writing Ottoman history leads to the not altogether surprising result that early 18th-century Istanbul presents a much more complex culturescape than the simplistic notion of Westernization implies. In replacing one exclusivist way of thinking by another, however, Erimtan exposes himself to the question of what we gain by describing modes and articulations of cultural life in the Ottoman capital in terms of an either/or of Western vs. Safavid/Islamic influences instead of a lieu of encounters of various kinds and directions.

This point is illustrated by the article of Orlin Sabev (Orhan Salih) in the same volume. It aims at challenging the common perception of the introduction of the printing press in 18th-century Istanbul as a failure („They did not read what I printed,“ Ibrahim Müteferrika utters as fictive last words in a recent play, p. 63). Sabev collects, from a variety of sources, among them the probate inventory of the printer, the numbers of books printed and books sold in order to prove the commercial success of the enterprise. By specialising on dictionaries and non-religious literature like history and geography, the printing press had catered primarily for those involved in government and thus on a utilitarian programme of publishing (p. 78). In selling seventy percent of its production in Müteferrika’s lifetime, it was more successful than some of its early-modern European counterparts. Sabev emphasises that the impact of the printing press was not a sudden revolution, but a long-term process of acculturation which holds true for the „Europe“ of Gutenberg as well as the Istanbul of Müteferrika.

In his article, Babak Rahimi addresses imperial circumcision rituals as a way to understand the changing relationships between state and society. Building on the growing literature of Ottoman state organisation in the 18th century, he describes the importance of the rituals for the developing „theatre state“ (Clifford Geertz) of the Ottomans. The focal point is the role of the „nahil“, a wooden pole filled with flowers, fruit or sweets given to
the princes. Whereas it is easy to understand
the public performance of such rituals and
their symbolic use for the display of imperial
power, it seems more difficult to link them
directly and convincingly to socio-economic
transformations as Brahimi suggests (p. 92)
but does not prove.

The two remaining contributions are re-
lated more closely insofar as they both con-
cern coffeehouses. In a short review of the
existing literature, Ali Çaksu makes a case
for a more thorough investigation of the role
of Janissary coffeehouses in the urban fabric
where, for instance in Istanbul, coffeehouses
functioned as „headquarters of the Janissary
political and criminal activities“ (p. 120), cen-
tres of „Bektashism“ (p. 125) as well as busi-
ness ventures up to 1826.

Alan Mikhail promises a visit to Ottoman
coffeehouses while exploring questions re-
lated to gender and urban space. The article
starts with a critique of the gendered notions
of public and private in Ottoman contexts,
which reiterates arguments against a simple
transfer of the Habermasian concepts into the
Ottoman sphere. Passing fleetingly by Fou-
cault’s notion of heterotopias, Mikhail con-
cludes by summarising his theoretical stance
in the following terms: “... various ideas
of space within the Ottoman world existed
in concert with one another, and to suggest
a rigid conceptualization of space within the
Ottoman empire would in all likelihood prove
ineffective in describing the vast multiplicity
of spaces that made up the Ottoman world”
(p. 134). He then explores in a rather uneven
argument various aspects of the social uses
of neighborhood coffeehouses, as extension of
home for male customers, as places of gossip
and political discussion, but also as gendered
loci of poetical imaginings.

Referring to cases from Istanbul, Cairo,
Aleppo, Damascus and Jerusalem, Mikhail’s
article in particular, implicitly also the volume
as a whole, raises the old question of what we
mean by the label „Ottoman“. While I eas-
ily concede that „no single dichotomization
of space could accurately reflect Ottoman ur-
ban realities“ (p. 134), I wonder whether the
use of „Ottoman“ as a category of space, ur-
ban space and coffeehouses in particular, will
contribute to a fruitful discussion along these
lines, without a reference to more locally de-
fined cultural contexts. Though being the cap-
ital, Istanbul does not represent the Ottoman
empire as whole, not even in cultural terms.
Generalizations of this type do not strike me
as a promising way to contribute to the dis-
cussions and debates that are already well un-
derway in the field of Ottoman cultural his-
tory.

All in all, this collective undertaking raises
important questions for future discussions. In
the articles, they sometimes seem to become
of secondary importance behind the revision-
ist impetus to challenge previous scholarship.
This makes the volume of limited interest to a
general public beyond a rather circumscribed
circle of specialists, though this is probably
also the consequence of the rather excessive
price of the well-produced book.

HistLit 2010-2-068 / Astrid Meier über Sajdi,
Dana (Hrsg.): Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee.
Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century.