

INTRODUCTION

DURING THE LATE MORNING and afternoon of January 26, 1952, much of downtown Cairo burned. Tensions had been building for several months because of escalating conflict between Egyptian popular groups and British troops stationed in the Suez Canal Zone, the site of lingering British colonial control that had officially begun in 1882. The ongoing British political and military presence in the country had persisted during the granting of limited sovereignty to Egypt in the aftermath of the 1919 Egyptian Revolution. The Suez Canal remained a crucial link in the British Empire, and Egypt's strategic location for Allied troop mobility had been pivotal in the Second World War. Egypt's cotton economy continued to bind the former colony to Britain as both an exporter of raw cotton and an importer of finished textiles, despite the trade's great reduction after the 1930s. The popular struggle in 1951–1952 encompassed a broad spectrum of opposition—university students, communists, religious activists, and paramilitary groups linked to several of Egypt's political parties, all increasingly mobilized since the end of the war. The collapsing old regime of vastly polarized social classes, ruled by a monarchy that played the various political parties off each other to retain power, was by the fall of 1951 grasping for any form of popular legitimacy. Encouraging guerrilla fighting in the canal zone seemed to deflect, at least initially, popular anger from the internal contradictions of Egyptian politics and society. On January 25 several state officials called on the Egyptian auxiliary police forces in the canal port city of Ismailia to make a heroic stand against British forces. British troops responded strongly, killing, wounding, and capturing large numbers of Egyptian police.¹

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On that Black Saturday of January 26, 1952, angry crowds responded by rioting through the streets of Cairo and attacking symbols of imperial power and privilege, including British banks, clubs, and companies. Ten British citizens, several of whom were high-ranking officials, died violently while locked in the exclusive, all-British Turf Club. Barclay's Bank exploded into flames as protesters nearby dragged Europeans from their cars and beat them. Rioters repeatedly accosted the doorman of the Lady Cromer Dispensary as they searched in vain for its "English matron."² The local correspondent from the *London Times* reported that "agents for British motor-cars had showrooms burnt out; new cars offered for sale were pushed into the streets and destroyed by fire."³ The crowd also torched local nightclubs, hotels, and the cinemas along Fu'ad and Sulayman Pasha Streets, many "decorated with half-naked women that the demonstrators associated with the British and the corrupt King Faruq."⁴

Almost half the sites burned—three hundred in all—were commercial shops. Among the most prominent targets were eight of the city's luxurious department stores: Cicurel, Chemla, Orosdi-Back, Benzion, 'Adès, Chalons, ORECO, and Roberts Hughes. Specialty stores and smaller boutiques surrounding the department stores also burned, such as Pontremoli furniture store, Jacques nylon hose shop, and Schappino men's wear store. Commercial merchandise was widely pillaged, although rioters tossed much of it onto public roadways and lit it as bonfires. Most downtown streets remained impassable for days because of the acrid-smelling piles of burned merchandise. One observer noted that littered through the streets were "carcasses of automobiles still smoking" and "cardboard boxes from which were sticking out a pair of socks, a necktie or a scarf, [and] half-burned shirts."⁵

As a political struggle to control space and consumer style, the Cairo Fire in fact entailed the destruction of local society as much as imperial presence. Consumer goods such as socks, neckties, shirts, and cars figured visibly in the downtown ruins as targets of political protest, although they sat somewhat uncomfortably as both symbols of exploitation and items of consumption shared by local protestors and their foreign targets. Photographs of demonstrators and bystanders at the Cairo Fire and of the defendants in the trials that followed show many of them attired in trousers, shoes, jackets, and shirts; others dressed in a mixture of older, more local (*baladi*) styles, such as gownlike galabiyas or turbans, paired with various items of Western dress.⁶ Ahmad Husayn, the leader of a fascist-style party who was initially charged with instigating the fires, wore a suit, suspenders, collared and button-front shirt, tie, and tarbush

in the courtroom during his trial in May, as he did regularly in party meetings.⁷ Trial testimony pivoted on conflicting eyewitness accounts of whether Husayn himself was in the vicinity of the primary buildings set afire just as they were being lit or only his car, driven by his chauffeur and carrying other members of his party. Reliable witnesses apparently saw Husayn, his driver, and his bodyguard together when the bodyguard threw “an Egyptian flag on top of one of the burning heaps of material from a store” later in the day and then disappeared. What was never called into question, however, was the identity of the car—it was a black Citroën.⁸

For many visiting observers, this represented the paradox at the heart of Egyptian colonial politics. Egyptians seemed to struggle against the very styles of clothing and the very commodities that they consumed: they rode in European cars to set fire to European car showrooms and stood trial for willful destruction of suits and silk ties attired in what looked like the same outfits. Many people derisively attributed the contradiction to Egyptian cultural incoherence and intellectual incompetence, arguing that Egyptians did not fully understand the meaning of their own consumption. Such observers tended to divide the world into two primary styles, focusing on a cultural duality that juxtaposed wholly separate spheres of urban culture: traditional versus modern, native versus foreign, Egyptian versus European, old versus new, *baladi* versus *ifrangi* (Western style). Fifteen years earlier, the Egyptian illustrated magazine *al-Musawwar* had used just such terms to disparage the variety of clothing styles visible on the streets of Cairo.⁹ The lack of coherence in “outward appearance contradicts our nobility” as a nation, the writer warned, pointing a particularly harsh finger at Egyptians who “invented a mixed-up dress [*zayyan khalitan*]” by blending into the same outfit items of clothing from different national cultures, such as pairing the gownlike galabiya with a jacket and pants or wearing “western dress [*al-zayy al-ifrangi*] and a felt skullcap [*libda*]” together. The inconsistencies appeared especially stark in the case of a man photographed gazing into a “shop window filled with varieties of *ifrangi* clothes,” himself wearing a jacket and pants with a skullcap and, even more “amazingly,” wooden clogs (*qabaqib*) on his feet. Sartorial unity, the writer concluded, would reinforce a national linguistic unity—“the need to make Arabic the language visible to the eye in every place”—and contribute to a visual uniformity of space that could be a crucial platform for an emerging national politics.

Portraying Egyptians and other colonial subjects as national failures by focusing on their mixed-up dress was a remarkably common technique of

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metropolitan power. American traveler Finley Acker portrayed such a figure in 1899 (see Figure 1), remarking that “the dress of [Egyptian] men is frequently modified by the partial adoption of European fashions, the grotesqueness of which is quite striking when an Arab is seen wearing his conventional long skirt and fez, but, at the same time, displaying European gaiters [boots] and a short spring overcoat.”¹⁰ Derogatory descriptions of local dress participated in broader struggles over the direction colonial societies should take to modernize and thus “earn” national independence.¹¹ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey’s reformist and pro-Western ruler, publicly ridiculed a Turkish man’s hybridized adaptation to new clothing laws in 1925.¹² European travelers and Chinese Americans bemoaned the “incongruous” and “inappropriate” mixtures of clothing styles in China in the same period, much as British officials opposed the wearing of caps by their Indian employees, since the caps “were not ‘western’ nor were they ‘oriental,’ and hence by application they were some kind of bastard concoction.”¹³ The mocking tone of colonial and elite accounts reveals the anxieties produced by mixed-up consumption practices that tended to defy the neat, binary categories on which colonial domination and nationalist revolt both rested.



Figure 1. An Egyptian man wearing mixed-up dress, including a galabiya, turban, short overcoat, and *ifrangi* boots. Drawing by C. P. Shoffner, in Finley Acker, *Pen Sketches* (Philadelphia: McLaughlin Brothers, 1899), 9.

Other colonial subjects eschewed rigid categories of difference and contrast, instead describing stylistic contests in the language of propinquity or contiguity. According to these consumers, different regimes of styles overlapped and coexisted, especially in the complexity of urban space; styles were available as an interlocking set of strategies or vocabularies when invoked in particular ways. Egyptian writer Yahya Haqqi, in fact, called the interwar mixed-up style “a morseling [*taftit*],”¹⁴ in reference to the deliberate way that members of the lower-middle and lower classes acquired individual items of *ifrangi* clothing from the flea market (*suq al-kantu*)—“a jacket without its pants or pants without its jacket or an orphaned waistcoat.”¹⁵ The concept of morseling or a morseled style captures not only the discordant and interpenetrated bricolage Egyptians used to incorporate new or different types of clothing into their wardrobes or new uses of space into their experiences of the city. It also brings to the foreground the broader contexts of political and social power within which the fluid use of clothing style operated. New regional middle classes promoted modern cultural pursuits, forms of education, residential dwellings, and civic organizations to formulate novel forms of political and social power for themselves.¹⁶ Poverty and need shaped many morselized consumption styles, however, and members of the upper and middle classes also mixed items of consumption or uses of space to signal cultural affiliation or their location in more regional politics.¹⁷ Embedded in an unequal political culture, morseled consumption styles at times challenged and at other times accommodated political and cultural sovereignty. Although the mixing up of consumption styles could represent informal ways local subjects recaptured agency in the face of imperial power, the mixing also often signaled strategies with more local or individual goals, and thus we should be mindful not to romanticize them.¹⁸

As importantly, Egyptian economic nationalists such as Ahmad Husayn in political struggles focused on the origin of commodities—their “product-nationality”¹⁹—rather than particular styles. In the absence of locally made versions of some goods, practicing economic nationalism meant choosing a relatively neutral foreign product. In such a way, Egypt’s lack of automobile manufacturing made French imports (such as Citroëns) preferable to British. Likewise, Egyptian dress could mean *ifrangi*-style clothing, such as trousers, jackets, ties, and collared and button-front shirts, if it was produced (the fabric woven or the outfits tailored) or sold in Egypt or Egyptian establishments. The relative complexity of determining what counted as nationalist consumption,

then, both had consequences for and grew out of the complexity in ownership, geography, and merchandise of commercial space itself.

Disregard for the empirical intricacy of urban style and space helps explain why the Cairo Fire has remained poorly understood since 1952. Most investigation into the event has centered on the actors and political plots of January 1952: the short-term events, immediate causes, breaches of responsibility, and conspiracies that instigated the city's burning. As Anne-Claire Kerboeuf puts it, "Until today, the main question has been who set fire to Cairo and which political leader is to be blamed."²⁰ Although many histories of Egypt accord the fire the status of "death spasm of the monarchical regime,"²¹ it usually figures as merely a self-explanatory bookend to periodize the recent past: the capstone of histories of the increasing opposition to entrenched political parties and the polarized class structure under Kings Fu'ad and Faruq, or the nadir of popular despair that invited the Free Officers' coup of 1952, thus launching the revolutionary era of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser.²² As an all-purpose explanation of why things changed in 1952, the fire remains in both the scholarly and the popular imaginations clouded by a static, dichotomous picture of the city that spawned it. This limitation has restricted its role in Egyptian historical memory to either a moment of national shame or a decisive step toward full national independence.²³

Although questions of responsibility and recruitment are certainly important, many explanations of the fire rest on a premise of the dual-city character of Cairo imported from other colonial settings such as North and South Africa.²⁴ Kerboeuf, in her excellent history of popular mobilization during the fire, relies on such a description of Ismailia, the downtown commercial quarter that burned: "This elitist new neighborhood soon became a social enclave, complete with sartorial and linguistic markers. It became assumed that to enter one of the center's shops or coffee shops, one had to have an effendi look (shoes, a suit, and a tarboosh) and speak a foreign language. Financial means were consequently required. . . . [Thus], Isma'iliya was actually a European micro-society few Egyptians could frequent."²⁵ In accounts of the fire, the exclusivity of downtown commerce stands in as self-evident justification for Egyptian animosity toward and alienation from the district. This narrative strategy frames the fire as a purging of parasitical elements—a self-interested local elite colluding with foreign capital—from the otherwise whole and uncomplicated national fabric. Explanations of the 1952 fire that rely on such a tale of two Cairos thus risk portraying an unwarranted social consensus, a belief that all local

residents could be clearly categorized as either foreign or native, in pre-1952 Egypt.²⁶ More than historical accuracy is at stake here. Erasing the ambivalences of pre-1952 Egyptian life has strengthened nationalism's self-justificatory, and at times quite coercive, claims to represent an authentic and eternal society.

A City Consumed instead takes a longer look back to the interwar period, to the changing space of the urban downtown and the commercial and sartorial practices that circulated there, to recast the Cairo Fire as both rupture and continuity—as a culmination of the hybridized society that grew in the first half of the century and a break with that world and its attendant versions of Egyptian nationalism. I argue that the specific materiality of the space of the colonial city and the goods purveyed there fostered a flexible and intimate culture of consumption in which local residents fluidly and even unpredictably moved through transitional spaces, combined items of sartorial style, and understood themselves to be Egyptian. The concrete and specific histories of retail space and everyday consumer objects ultimately demonstrate that the contours of colonial politics in Egypt formed as much by the particular trajectory of local consumption as the official dynamics of European rule.²⁷ Commercial practices worked to etch the colonial order onto consumer bodies, and commercial circuits tied areas of the city together in unexpected ways. Commercial penetration thus created a sense of captivity among many Egyptians, ultimately inscribing a discourse of self-destruction—of national suicide—into anticolonial resistance.

Space, or the ways power inhered in the built environment, thus comprises a central problematic for the book. Foucault argues that “the anxiety of [the twentieth century] has to do fundamentally with space” rather than time. “The problem of the human site or living space is . . . that of knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end. Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.”²⁸ Part of the scholarly fascination with space has to do with its linkage to politics and, specifically, as David Harvey argues, “the relationship between the physicality of urban public space and the politics of the public sphere.”²⁹ In Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century, the central political questions revolved around achieving national sovereignty.

Who and what was considered Egyptian in this period, a seemingly basic empirical and historical question, remains surprisingly mired in generalized, prescriptive thinking. The Arab nationalist view that emerged in the decade

after the Cairo Fire projected back to the colonial and interwar periods a simplistic definition of *authentic Egyptian* as Arabic speaking and Muslim or, possibly, Coptic Christian. Conversely, alternative interpretations of Egyptian identity in this period have invoked a cosmopolitanism that, as Will Hanley explains, “consistently entails nostalgia for a more tolerant past” and tends to generalize elite experience over society as a whole.³⁰ Turning our analytic gaze on material structures of space and clothing offers a corrective to the more diffuse imaginaries of community formed by print capitalism and theorized by Benedict Anderson.³¹ Objects of consumption acted as vehicles of community in ways that brought nationalism into completely different registers of corporeality and intimacy because of the effects of material objects on people.³² Viewing Egyptian history through the lenses of space and consumption, then, provides an alternative to descriptions of modernity or nationalism that are based on the experiences of the upper and middle classes, commonly considered the bearers of new cultural practices and ideologies in the Middle East.³³

CONSUMPTION AND COLONIAL POLITICS

Long considered the crucible for modernity, urban commercial space has been the focus of many studies in different national contexts. The particular growth of nineteenth-century European and American cities enabled the anonymity and mobility of the dandy, the flaneur, or the “woman adrift,” consuming materially and visually what Marshall Berman calls “a great fashion show, a system of dazzling appearances, brilliant facades, glittering triumphs of decoration and design.”³⁴ Newly opened spaces of cities, such as wide and well-lit Haussmanian boulevards flanked by sidewalks, arcades, plate-glass windows, cafés, and commercial goods, became accessible to crowds of spectators arriving from far-flung neighborhoods on novel modes of public transportation. Enormous department stores, designed to be both “palaces of consumption” and “cathedrals of commerce,” anchored the new world, providing goods to outfit modern homes and wardrobes as well as space for spectatorship and cultural priming. Such stores were places for dressing up—for trying on clothing in stores without necessarily buying, as new policies of free entry disarticulated the processes of shopping and purchasing and new forms of display created imaginary geographies of consumption and place. They were also places to be seen, as new sorts of work and leisure subjectivities and alliances created a social world of urban spectatorship and “counter cultures” that overlaid most women and some men with sexual desire as part of the new urban spectacle.³⁵ The general plasticity

and relative vacuity of commercial display in stores—department-store racks, for instance, offered shirts in different sizes, colors, and patterns or trousers in a variety of cuts and fabrics—could accommodate the projection of desire and the malleability of identity more easily than other institutions, such as schools, government offices, or most families. As Claire Walsh has noted critically, the department store functions, then, “to define our present age as distinct and ‘modern’ . . . as the analogue of ‘industrial revolution,’ Marxist alienation, and the beginnings of mass consumption.”³⁶ Studies of consumption that have made “the spatial turn” away from institutions such as department stores, world’s fairs, or retailer and trade associations to focus on contests of movement in public spaces have returned, perhaps paradoxically, to linking consumption to wider national identities of place in locally specific ways, and this overlaps with studies that link consumption to citizenship more directly.³⁷

Although most studies of consumption have taken the Euro-American metropole as their analytic focus,³⁸ histories based in nonmetropolitan archives to reconstruct the specific ways that colonial economies shaped consumption cultures have offered a radical rethinking of the global flows of power and commerce. Novel metropolitan products flooded colonial markets, ultimately even altering the needs of colonial consumers, but preexisting local meanings shaped reception of the new, often creating consumption practices that contradicted prescriptive metropolitan marketing.³⁹ A growing literature about the history of Middle Eastern consumption has begun to outline some of the local specificities in regional trade and cultural practice that shaped the domestic trajectories of Egyptian consumption.⁴⁰ The inflection of Middle Eastern consumption regimes by religious politics has complicated broader narratives of the relationship of politics to economic change, especially as fatwa (religious advice) literature presented a unique intermediate public space to control—often in unexpected ways—the consumption of various goods and associated behaviors.⁴¹ The history of colonialism has also helped call into question the notion that modernity is a chronological period, a condition, or a cluster of objective attributes. Scholars have increasingly relocated modernity as part of a more performative or “claim-making” process,⁴² although few have engaged theoretically with tradition, implicitly relegating it instead to the role of static foil for the measurement of modernity’s progress.⁴³

Nuanced studies of nonmetropolitan consumption practices can sharpen our understanding of the complexities in the constitution and expression of membership, power, complicity, and resistance in colonial politics. Timothy

Mitchell's assertion that colonizing involves "the spread of a new political order that inscribes in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real" broadened the terrain of colonial politics into mundane spaces and practices.⁴⁴ Colonial politics were characterized, according to Partha Chatterjee and Benedict Anderson, by the state's emphasis on practices of governmentality in the absence of popular sovereignty. Classificatory divisions of the population made to facilitate the government's control through policy of the various groups under its jurisdiction tended to create a public sphere and political society based on clearly demarcated collective identities and ethnicities rather than, at least in theory, a more individualized sense of national belonging grounded in a discourse of equal rights and popular sovereignty in noncolonial states.⁴⁵ Colonial states engaged in the coercive process of ordering, enumerating, and classifying the heterogeneity of colonial societies through the census, taxation, military conscription, public health campaigns, regulatory and educational missions, property laws, land settlement schemes, and so forth.⁴⁶ This experience of governmentality ensured that development discourses about the emergence of a postcolonial "national economy" would fixedly regard "the state as the engine of progress."⁴⁷

Expanding the analytic realm of the colonial public sphere to include consumption enables the recovery of alternative formations of collective identities and struggles for citizenship or legal enfranchisement made possible by boycotts and other consumer movements, by increasingly visible mass consumption, and by the circulation of people in new commercial spaces.⁴⁸ Specifically, it allows two important shifts in understanding colonial politics: first, to new nonstate actors and arenas, such as consumers, traders, and the commercial sector⁴⁹ and, second, to practices that blurred rather than inscribed classificatory categories, such as sartorial and domestic styles that mixed up objects commonly employed to differentiate groups, or to fluidity in urban movement that contrasted with static forms in the built environment. In fact, European colonization facilitated in most places, including Egypt, the movement of population and capital, which increased multiplicity in juridical status, categories of citizenship, languages, and customs among local residents, thereby frustrating colonial and postcolonial state efforts to "represent the country as a singular, national economy," as Mitchell reminds us.⁵⁰ Settler colonial regimes maintained "racial frontiers" by policing gendered intimacies, including sex and domestic arrangements, among their subjects. Yoking the intimate spaces of

family and domestic life to the high politics of imperial rule—studying “their ambiguities as much as . . . their injustices”—brings the microphysics of race and the surveillance of the boundaries of public and private to the center of colonial politics.⁵¹ Much as such studies take their analytic punch from depicting the implementation of colonial rule in nonpolitical spaces such as the home and popular storytelling, investigations of hybridized consumption practices in colonial societies can illuminate how commodities simultaneously condensed political power and fractured colonial rule. Hybridized styles of dress point, then, to a diffuse nature of power in colonial societies or its uneven concentration among different locations.⁵² This spatialization of power scored colonial cities with fault lines more convoluted than the broad avenues usually associated with colonial urban planners.⁵³ The resulting sinuosity routed urban disorders such as the Cairo Fire in seemingly random directions.

Quotidian consumption practices and consumerist politics such as boycotts not only offered consumers a frame to imagine themselves as national subjects but also linked colonial subjects across political borders. Egyptians during the interwar period envisioned themselves in a broad field of colonial politics that included North Africans, the Irish, the Chinese, and Palestinians but most centrally featured Indians. The Egyptian press followed the emergence in India of locally produced cotton textiles as a national symbol in the anticolonial struggle, and Egyptian activists explicitly modeled some of their tactics, such as bonfires and boycotts, on Indian experiences.⁵⁴ “A visual vocabulary of the nation” deployed through live performance, courtly culture, religious practice, and newer artistic media such as film, photography, and posterizing became an especially important supplement to print capitalism to create community in India, a visibility that was also expanded by consumer objects such as homespun, home-woven cloth.⁵⁵ Ultimately, as I demonstrate in this book, the materiality of Egyptian raw cotton (its long-staple fiber in particular) imposed limits on the development of cotton as a vehicle for mass politics on the Indian model. In a similar way, critiques about the dual city of colonialism that developed most strikingly under French colonialism were imported to Egypt but failed to capture the more fluid mobility of Egyptians in urban space.⁵⁶ The prism of consumption thus allows us to see the Egyptian case as a model of colonial politics that differs from both North Africa and India.

The microphysical workings of colonial power through marking and classification techniques of governmentality thus extended to the corporeal and spatial practices of commerce and consumption. The Egyptian case specifically

suggests that shopping and consumption bound the bodies of subjects to colonial regimes in very intimate ways and led to the framing of anticolonial protest as a project of self-destruction. A central argument of this book is that a sense of captivity, by regulatory, material, and discursive mechanisms, marked colonial consumption as distinctive from that in the metropole. Forced to overconsume certain imported goods or prohibited from consuming by the impoverishment caused by the extraction of resources and surplus, colonial subjects negotiated through economies of commercial desire that had been built on dramatic asymmetries in law and power.⁵⁷ As a poetics of protest, captivity narratives underlined how boycotts and other forms of opposition in commercial space and consumption could act as a “spiritual trial” and moral claim for Egyptians seeking national sovereignty.⁵⁸ Gender, family, and domesticity are important themes in captivity narratives, as they highlight the intensity and reach of the captor from the political sphere into the private realm.⁵⁹ Consumption’s ability to link the public and the private worlds made it ripe terrain for such narrativizing. As claim-making devices, these narratives also trained attention to the physical sacrifices entailed by constrained consumption. Consumer captivity was, however, an ambiguous process. Commerce did not construct itself as coercive. Marketing and merchandise displays attempted to captivate consumers as much as to capture their spending power. The iteration of such displays in urban space and the local press worked at times to overwhelm consumers (and nonconsumers) with a sense of the profusion of available goods, although at other times excess helped regularize and routinize expectations and patterns of consumption, an important component in the ultimate translation of affective desires into mundane practices or acquisitions. Consumer spending could act as a pathway for upward mobility or at least secure a temporary confusion of status that individuals might exploit to challenge more rigid social stratifications based on class, ethnicity, nationality, age, or even gender. At the same time, many people were held captive by their inability to consume, a sense of entrapment intensified by the social heterogeneity of urban space that allowed easy comparison and competition.

Consumer desire helped fissure colonialism, then, in part by psychically blurring and yet reinforcing the “binary logic of colonial power” that underlay the ordering practices of governmentality.⁶⁰ To consider consumption a spatial practice, as I do in this book, is to acknowledge the important role shopping in commercial space played in the production of meaning about commodities as well as to focus on the ways that consumer goods, such as loose gowns, heeled

shoes, or tight, fragile stockings, could discipline the physical body. Spatial relations of the colonial city, it is often argued, were influenced more by race than by class.⁶¹ Hybridized cultures of consumption, forged in the relations of *both* class and race, most powerfully challenged the visual and spatial instantiation of colonial power in Egypt. As this book demonstrates, the mixed-up styles of dress and uses of space in local consumption imperiled the semicolonial state's efforts to classify and order the populations it controlled and channeled nationalist activism in specific directions. They also rendered the Cairo Fire an imprecise tool for decolonization. As an escape from colonial consumer captivity, the fire in fact left many Egyptians with deeply conflicting emotions. As leftist activist Anouar Abdel-Malek describes it, the fire produced "a vision of horror unforgettable to all who lived through that day of sorrow."⁶² Tilting the analytic balance in understanding the Cairo Fire toward lived fluidity, as *A City Consumed* does, helps counteract both a narrow nationalist view of the past and a neo-Orientalist assumption that "what went wrong" (to use Bernard Lewis's popular phrase) was that Egyptians chose to remain mired in local tradition rather than embrace Western modernity.⁶³

PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS: ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is a study of common commercial goods and space that had a profound effect on politics and community in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century. While it seeks to understand the relationships among objects, especially as they were assembled into morseled or mixed-up regimes of style, it does not attempt a comprehensive study of objects or consumerism in Egypt. Rather, it investigates the histories of a matrix of commodities that operated in a coherent semiotic system in which the use of individual objects communicated locally understood meanings and status as part of a broader social logic.⁶⁴ Such a study demands simultaneous examination of prescriptions about the proper use of goods and the lived experiences of how they actually functioned in everyday life. To that end, the book uses a wide range of primary-source materials, including state archives in Egypt, France, and England; the Egyptian press; commercial and trade publications; speeches and autobiographical writings; and films, photographs, and literary sources. The Egyptian press expanded dramatically after the First World War, and in particular, illustrated magazines such as *Ruz al-yusuf*, *al-Ithnayn*, and *al-Musawwar* increased popular readership, which had been previously confined to a small, literate

part of the urban and provincial strata.⁶⁵ While the reception of the magazines and their advertisements remains largely unknown, the marketing and satirical writings of the press can still offer historians an impression of the parameters of commodity politics and how people made sense of its changes. Likewise, films offered new frames for people to imagine themselves as consumers, social actors, and ultimately as national citizens, especially important in societies such as midcentury Egypt characterized by low formal literacy and a split between the spoken and written languages.⁶⁶ Although the exact ways that objects shaped the practices and habits of the self have been difficult for historians to track through archives, broader shifts in more public debates about the meanings of goods and their relationships to different members of society help identify significant changes that affected a wide array of people, the contours of ordinary perception, and how these altered over time.

The book's narrative arc from urban growth in the late nineteenth century through the first decade of Nasser's reign raises the question of defining *colonialism* in Egypt. In this book, I use *colonial* in several ways. On one level, I distinguish between the actual colonial situation of Egypt during 1882–1922, when Egypt was under the formal administration of Britain (it was actually a protectorate from only December 1914 to February 1922 but had been administered in all significant respects since the British invasion in 1882), and the semicolonial situation of the 1922–1956 period; throughout this second period British officials continued to wield considerable administrative and military power in Egypt, enshrined by the Four Reserved Points of the declaration that abrogated the protectorate, and although slowly renegotiated in 1933–1956, these powers were in large part retained. In a more general sense, however, I use *colonial* to describe the broader socioeconomic regime in Egypt during this entire period, when the Egyptian economy was based on monocrop agriculture (of cotton) intended primarily for export and the importation of vast quantities of finished goods for consumption. Differences in power between Europe and Egypt in this period also helped create a colonial situation with respect to “cultural capital” and social practices, in which the European assumed a certain hegemony over the local.⁶⁷

Although the book focuses on making more complex a notion of the local, *European* was also not a monolithic term. Many Egyptian nationalists preferred French language and culture to English, in part for aesthetic reasons and in part because of the structure of education in Egypt but also as a sort of anticolonial protest against their British overlords. The use of French, especially after

the 1867 World Exposition in Paris, became in Egypt (as elsewhere) its own autonomous cultural mode, reflecting an interest in France but not necessarily a desire for French rule or hegemony.⁶⁸ Some Egyptians under British colonial rule adopted French cultural mores and language to signal their modernity while still protesting the politics of the colonial situation. Later, more populist nationalists found the division between French and British cultures specious, arguing that there was a more generalized European cultural dominance, although by then many of the European practices and clothing styles were so engrained in Egyptian society as to make them local for many middle-class Egyptians. In general, I use *colonial* to refer to Egypt's relationship with Europe, rather than to other places with which it had what may be considered a colonial relationship. Egypt was, some would contend, a colonial province of the Ottoman Empire until 1914; it also commanded a certain colonial authority over neighboring areas such as Sudan and Nubia in this period.

The book thus follows the politics of colonialism and consumption through several Egyptian theaters as tension rose toward the 1952 Cairo Fire. Chapter 1 investigates the process by which the urban built environment under colonialism was framed as a dual city and juxtaposes this perception to the lived mobility of Egyptians through that space. I focus on morseled clothing styles and transitional neighborhoods between the two cities, spaces and practices historically disparaged because they fit into neither side of the double-city binarism but crucial, I argue, to the defiance of the binary logic of colonialism and the narrow conception of *Egyptian* that followed from it. Chapter 2 turns to shopping, with a particular focus on the people who circulated and worked in downtown commercial districts and the department stores that anchored them. Close examination of the histories of stores, their owners and employees, and their customers demonstrates the multiple ways that people identified as Egyptian in the interwar years.

Chapter 3 traces the politics of commercial boycotts in interwar Egypt. Boycotts were a moment when consumption emerged as a political arena to defy colonialism, and they helped initiate broad public awareness that colonialism was at least partially implemented through consumption. In so doing, boycotts popularized a language of dichotomies to understand Egyptian politics and encouraged the development of nationalist industries and commercial spaces. Chapter 4 examines the urgent campaigns to create a domestic market for locally produced cotton socks and shoes in response to boycotters. The cultivation and exportation of raw cotton had long driven colonialism

in Egypt, and the development of a national cotton textile industry and the local consumption of its products were early and widely supported strategies of more elite Egyptian nationalists. The local footwear market grew in the interwar years under competition between *ifrangi* and *baladi* styles of shoes to create a dynamic set of commercial practices that propelled the consumption of new forms of footwear.

Chapter 5 turns to the transitional postwar years of 1945–1952, when mounting social and political tension put pressure on the old-regime society and a colonial politics that had been reinvigorated during the war. State-sponsored Egyptianization of the economy began to shift the terrain of commerce at the same time that cartoons, short stories, poetry, films, and other cultural texts developed a satirical focus on footwear and nylon stockings to expose anew the contradictions of negotiating the dichotomies that supposedly marked semicolonial Egypt. Finally, Chapter 6 retells the story of the Cairo Fire with a focus on its commercial and human targets to examine the complexity with which the foreign and the local remained imbricated after decades of nationalist activity. Rebuilding the downtown in the aftermath of the fire reinforced nationalization programs at the end of the decade that emphasized themes of public ownership, popular accessibility, and continuity in ways that only subtly altered the context of shopping and consumption.

The historically specific politics of describing different cultural and economic practices is contested terrain. This applies as much to historians writing today as to customers shopping in Cairo in the 1930s. People in Egypt marshaled terms such as *native*, *indigenous*, *local*, *European*, *traditional*, and *modern* to set certain practices off from others. For this reason, none of these terms can innocently serve as an empirically transparent description or label. Nevertheless, the act of writing necessitates lexical choices and the fixing of terms from their more fluid context. I have chosen in this book to use Arabic terms from Egyptian vernacular to describe different styles: I refer to more local styles as *baladi* (“of the country”) and more European ones as *ifrangi* (“Frankish,” or European).⁶⁹ I intend these terms to reflect the fluidity of Egyptian perception of these practices as Western or Eastern influenced, rather than focusing on whether in some objective sense they were actually or accurately copied from European or local practice. Capturing the fluidity of the practices of consumption and of the politics of naming, in the context of colonial politics, is the essence of this book.