For the article critique assignment, I will analyze James Grehan’s article “Smoking and ‘early Modern’ Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East”. I first read the article at the beginning of the semester, when I had very little background about my research topic. Then I reread it after I had done some research. The article is filled with information related to the early history of tobacco, and in the first reading, it was hard to soak it all in. Parts of the article make me feel like reading an encyclopedia entry. For readers that do not have any background specifically about the history of the tobacco in Ottoman Empire, this article can provide a great survey. But if you think you know something about the topic, you still need some channel of dialogue to better formulate your “own” arguments, (which is the worst stage one can possibly be? in) descriptive nature of the article makes it harder to have a better engagement with the author. To be too afraid of being wrong, the author does not provide a clear argument. There are some interesting ideas that he presents, but still he does not build on to them (tobacco’s important role in the creation of the new consumer culture/lifestyle). At the beginning of the article, he states some argumentative points, but then he move on to the lengthy debate on moral and legal status of tobacco in “Ottoman lands”. In his conclusion, author restates argumentative
points that some of it could be verified by using common sense. Even though the topic represents a great opportunity to address a greater historical question on the social dynamics of the early modern Ottoman society, Grehan chose to play safe and write a general survey about it. In this short critical analysis, I will discuss some problematic points about the article that I found important to denote.

Grehan starts the article with a lively depiction of a social unrest that broke out in the streets of Cairo in 1699. He uses the imagery of the social uproar against smoking tobacco as his starting point, and hints at the main purpose of article: to show the transformation of the moral and legal status of the tobacco. In Grehan’s narrative, when it first arrived in Ottoman lands in the end of the sixteenth century, the novel practice of tobacco consumption was acknowledged as unacceptable social behavior. However, years of intense public discussion moved the consumption of tobacco within the boundaries of acceptable social behavior. And now in Grehan’s opinion, there is a “tolerant consensus” towards smoking tobacco all over the Middle East. There is something? to unpack about the statement which draws the framework of the Grehan’s analysis. It is hard to talk about a consensus of opinion on any social practice, and in the case of tobacco it might be easier to bring more evidence for the opposite side of the Grehan’s argument. Especially in Turkey, anti-smoking position has found a dominant support from the government. Turkish president/prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan collects cigarettes from his supporters’ pockets in public meetings, and even uses his own social media account to encourage people to quit smoking. Over the years, smoking in public has become more restricted, and it is almost impossible for tobacco companies to use advertisements in public areas. I do not know any social group that defends smoking and promotes wider tobacco consumption (maybe other than people work for tobacco industry). Smoking is still popular, but this does not necessarily mean that there
is a “tolerant consensus”. There is a consensus on the legal status of smoking. As far as I know, smoking tobacco is legal all around the Middle East. Grehan confuses the categories of legally and socially accepted actions. One social practice might be legally permissible but still socially unacceptable (as in the case of the adultery). While presenting the tobacco debate between the different Muslim jurists over centuries, Grehan carelessly used the different categories of social regulation. In the context of Islamic Law, he uses moral, legal and religious status of the tobacco almost interchangeably. He presents the debate in such way that it is impossible to see the difference between the moral, religious and legal rules. In his presentation of the tobacco debate, he repeats his sources which are the arguments of different Muslim jurist at length. However, he quotes Muslim jurists in a way that is similar to quoting a newspaper article. He provides a very little background about the jurist himself and the social environment that he lived in. He favors one source over the other and presents much longer quotations for the arguments that sound better for the modern reader. He uses jurists’ arguments to show the moral status of the tobacco, and couple of pages later, he uses different arguments to show the religious status of the tobacco. Still he does not explain how categories of religious and moral rules are different from each other. If he paid more attention to the methodology that Muslim jurists used to formulate their arguments, it would have eased the confusion. It might help him to see the difference between the legal reasoning and religious prophecy, and better address the question of legality and morality.

The most evident problem of the article is that author provides little social and historical context, and this made it harder for me to process the flow of new information pouring throughout the reading. For a regular audience who knows very little about the history of the Ottoman Empire, most of the new information probably will hang in the air.
Especially regarding the sources that he used, he gives very little information about the Muslim jurists’ background. He gives a general contextual information about the seventeenth and eighteenth century Ottoman Empire, but mostly overlooks the local differences between the Ottoman cities. He treats Cairo, Istanbul and Damascus as if they are part of a centralized “nation state” like political entity and does not put much emphasis on the local administrative dynamics and general administrative structure. I believe the decentralized structure of the empire makes it difficult to categorize the political geography that Grehan analyzed as “Ottoman Middle East”. In addition, in that political geography, non-Muslims composed a significant part of the population. However, in this “Great Tobacco Debate”, we hardly hear their voices. The author choses to focus on the Muslim jurists’ perspectives and state officials’ reactions. There is only one reference from a non-Muslim point of view (a quotation from a Greek priest) in a 25-pages long article. Grehan’s approach to the seventeenth and eighteenth century Ottoman society (as if it was a Muslim “nation”) is quite problematic to me. Any survey on a given topic about the Ottoman society that does not include non-Muslim experience is incomplete.

There are other problems in the article where author makes 40-50 year chronological jumps, and makes bold claims without a reference, but I do not want to milk it. Overall, Grehan’s article is a good survey on the early history of tobacco and seventeenth and eighteenth century consumer culture. He presents the public debate between the Muslim jurists over tobacco in great detail and uses a lot of primary source material, which might not be easy to access. I have some problems about the general structure of the article and author’s approach to the “Ottoman” society, but the article is still a useful source and good background reading if you are seventeenth and eighteenth century Ottoman History literate.
Student,

This is a very strong critique. You have clearly and with considerably aplomb pointed out the problems in the article. There are a couple of problems, however. First, you could improve the structure of the critique. Strive to make clearer what each paragraph is about by a topic sentence. The second paragraph, for example, could definitely be broken up. It begins with a brief description of the article, but then morphs into some of your criticisms. The other problem I already mentioned above. You need to refer to specific pages when critiquing an article or book, and you should really also provide some examples to support your criticisms from the article, usually via quotations.

Overall, though, this is very well done.

Mark