

# Backlash

## An Argument against the Spread of American Popular Culture in Turkey

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Conventional warfare struck at the heart to kill and then conquer;  
Economic war struck at the belly to exploit and acquire riches;  
Cultural war strikes at the head to paralyze without killing, to  
conquer by slow rot, and to obtain wealth through the  
disintegration of cultures and peoples.  
—Henri Gobbard, *La Guerre Culturelle*

The intensification of the export of American popular culture was an indispensable facet of America's economic expansionist policy during the post-World War II years. America had ample opportunity to boost its market economy by disseminating consumerism by way of establishing the hegemony of its popular culture over many parts of the globe. This missionary undertaking was facilitated even more by the disintegration of the Soviet Block in the 1980s. In the 1990s, American consumer-sustained cultural hegemony, and the adaptation of the American lifestyle globally, is detectable not only in Western Europe but all over the world. As John Sullivan has observed:

One of the curiosities of travelling abroad is to be continually reminded of America. Button-down shirts, blue jeans, hamburgers (whether McDonald's or some local imitation like the oddly named Wimpy), jazz, Hollywood icons from John Wayne to Marilyn Monroe—the modern world has a sharply American look and a sometimes deafening American sound.<sup>1</sup>

Eastern Europe, as well as Turkey, also manifest the Americanizing trends creeping across the European continent. As with European societies infected by the lure of American culture, influential segments of Turkish society—especially the upper middle class and the rich—have adopted American consumer habits and cultural values, regardless of the serious social problems and cultural erosion this will inevitably create. The Americanization process, however, should not be interpreted as complete erosion of cultural identity or wholesale alteration of Turkish notions of national identity but as a serious threat to the retainment of cultural heritage by the younger generation. Similarly, modernization should be distinguished from blindfolded imitation of the American way of life and the adopting of cultural values that negate Turkish mores and moral values.

Americanization of Turkey was expedited during Turgut Özal's presidency<sup>2</sup> when private enterprise and consumerism were revitalized by state economic policies; nevertheless, Turkey was introduced to the American way of life as early as the mid-nineteenth-century. "It was a sensational event when *Missouri* anchored in Bosphorous: what it brought to Turkey was not only the coffin of the late Ambassador of the Turkish Republic to the United States but indeed a new way of life."<sup>3</sup> Several writers of the period drew attention to the potential of this encounter for social and cultural transformation;<sup>4</sup> nevertheless, consumer ideology and the American way of life were imported into Turkey with the first Frigidaire. "To become a small America" had become the core concept of Adnan Menderes' government in the 1950s and 60s;<sup>5</sup> economic aid under the Truman Doctrine coupled with admiration for the superpower of the world facilitated the internalization of American popular culture by the nouveau-riche that was created by the devaluation of 1946. During the Democrat Party period new economic policies foregrounding free enterprise and capitalism were adopted. While inflation soared on the one hand, free trade led to the exhaustion of foreign currency reserves on the other; these were spent on importing cars and household items. American-made consumer products, sold in small shops collectively called the American Bazaar, met the needs of the nouveaux-richtes, who could afford to emulate the American way of life. Turkish magazines designed after American models such as *Bütün Dünya* (Whole World, 1948)—a direct translation of *Reader's Digest* into Turkish—played an important role in the diffusion of American popular culture.<sup>6</sup>

Nowadays, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Open Buffet, Supermarket, Hypermarket, Shopping Centre/Mall, Suburb, Townhouse, Sports Centre, Disneyland are names Turkish people recognize. According to some, these are signs of the annexation of Turkey to the global village; according to others, they are the milestones of American

cultural and economic hegemony over the global village. For those surviving in the peripheries of the metropolitan centers or in underdeveloped hinterland Anatolia, they are the symbols of a virtual way of life beyond their reach.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, they are the milieu by which American popular culture is internalized, no matter how it is labeled—Americanization, cocolonization, or mcdonaldization. Identifying McDonald's as the symbol of America and its coveted market economy, George Ritzer has introduced the concept of "McDonaldization," which he defines as a wide-ranging, "inexorable process," the impact of which is felt in "education, work, travel, leisure-time activities, dieting, politics, the family, and virtually every other aspect of society."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in 1999, the McDonaldization of Turkey appears to be well and truly in motion. The metropolitan centers in Turkey, if not the whole country yet, have been transformed into a small-scale America where even the stable currency used in major transactions is the American dollar.

Nowadays, American popular culture is lived and consumed most of the time in Turkey, unconsciously and often quite naturally. Its consumption is facilitated by the variety and availability of consumer products, the growth of consumer credit, the accessibility of radio and TV to all corners of the country, the increase in the number and services of advertising agencies, and the rapid spread of communications technology. Under the direction of the leading class and the captains of industry, it is generated by the mass media promoting prescribed worldviews and ideologies that come as a package along with commercialism, capitalism, and consumerism.<sup>9</sup> However, the hidden cost of embracing American consumerism was that Turkey began to trade in its own authentic cultural traditions and autonomy for a disconcerting homogenization and standardization of its culture.

Mass media was the key force in cultivating the atmosphere in which American popular culture could flourish and exert its pervasive and corrosive effect on Turkish popular culture. American movies projected fake or idealized images of an affluent society, soap operas concentrated on image-making, entertainment programs promoting American values made their way into Turkish homes. A game show, significantly called *The Wheel of Fortune*, both commercializes entertainment by giving away consumer products as prizes and provokes the drive for competition. However, the lure of TV often alienates friends; it even divides family members, who sit glued to their seats and brainwashed into buying the latest products. In Turkey, as in the rest of the world, TV has also widened the gap between those who can afford to participate in commercial television's world of affluence and those who may only observe it from the outside.

Turkish food traditions are yielding to the competition of the major artifacts of contemporary global culture: McDonald's and Coca-Cola have caused drastic changes in Turkish eating and drinking habits. In recent years, the Turkish versions of McDonalds—"Dürümland," or "KebabHouse"—have served the traditional dishes of *shish kebab* and *döner kebab* (gyro), *lahmacun* (Turkish pizza), but have served them "American style." While they offer a clean, comfortably informal atmosphere, they also are characterized by a predictability and hyperefficiency that ultimately diminishes the pleasure of food by reducing it to "a factory assembly line product."<sup>10</sup> Lost is the warm, home-like atmosphere wherein carefully prepared traditional dishes are to be enjoyed in a relaxed setting. These fast food outlets are frequented by Turkish children and youngsters, who eagerly embrace Americanization of their diets. We are therefore bringing up a generation of hamburger and cola addicts with little or no interest in the traditional dishes of one of the richest cuisines of the world. Even more disturbing is Turkish youths' inclination toward American-style social behavior characterized by comfort-seeking, self-satisfaction, and mechanical homogeneity, dictated by what is in vogue. Such behavior thwarts Turkish norms and traditionally accepted social interaction based on decorum and austerity. Their parents, too, have developed the American habit of eating a large proportion of their meals outside their homes or serving frozen, microwavable, canned, or prepared foods at the family dinner table, regardless of their poor nutritional quality. Coca-Cola, beer, gin and tonic, whisky have already supplanted *ayran*, the traditional Turkish beverage, or *raki*, the traditional strong alcoholic drink.<sup>11</sup> Turkish coffee, meticulously prepared and served in demitasses, is nowadays regarded merely as a quaint delicacy to be consumed mainly by tourists. The elderly Turks who still sip it do so with nostalgia. Most Turkish homes and offices in cities now are stocked either with coffee machines that brew imported percolator coffee, or with hot pots for fixing Nescafé, which has come to be known as American coffee. The tea houses, where tea, the traditional Turkish drink, used to be served with samovars and special tea glasses, are also becoming tourist attractions. The coffee machines that have infiltrated the kitchens of almost all homes are symbolically hacking at the roots of tradition and threatening to contaminate Turkey's cultural heritage with an alien culture.

If American-style food consumption is merely one of many ways of internalizing American popular culture, the American way of combining shopping and entertainment in a hyperreality is another. Asserting their hegemony over the Turkish department stores modeled after Sears such as Vakko, Beymen, and Carsi, to name a few, the shopping centers and

malls constructed mainly in the suburbs of metropolitan centers serve this purpose. Unlike the closed bazaar, a hallmark of Istanbul's rich historical background and traditional heritage, what is sold in the malls—Atakule and Karum in downtown Ankara, Galleria and Bilkent Center in suburban Ankara, or Akmerkez, Atrium, Migros Center, and Galleria in Istanbul—is not only luxury merchandise but also prescribed values and a way of life. Like fast food readily served or brought to your door, these fancy, glass-roofed, cloistered wonderlands unabashedly propagate commerciality: sheltered shops and megastores overflowing with confectionery, designer jewelery, exclusive designer clothing and shoes, the desirable brands of sporting goods, gifts, toys, computer games—mostly imported luxury items. For lower-middle-class families, these shopping complexes are places of frustration, resentment, and estrangement from the privileged few. Conversely, being able to shop at these stores has become a status symbol, thus increasing the rift between the classes. For those who could not afford to shop at these stores with hard cash, there is an insidious antidote: credit cards and instalment plans ensure that one will keep up with one's neighbors, friends, or workmates, even if one cannot keep up with the bills. Debt used to be a source of shame; nowadays spending—not thrift—is a virtue.

Shopping for new clothes and shoes before the two religious holidays used to be an important ritual. Now, clothes shopping during sales in the shopping complexes has replaced this ritual, stripping the religious holidays of their traditional significance. The malls, considered by teenagers as little heavens, pose a serious threat for Turkish youngsters, as they are places where they can pick up the habits of American “mall bunnies” and “mall rats”: hanging out in the food court outlets until late at night and greeting each other using gestures and words they have picked up from American movies and soap operas. Moreover, the well-to-do upper middle-class youth, who too often are given more money than they need, can vent their lust for conspicuous consumption. Their disruptive impact on social and cultural permanence is felt more and more as “the old virtues of thrift and self-control are rapidly giving way to a culture of gratification.”<sup>12</sup> This is quite apart from the role of the old markets which, as social centers, promoted social and cultural solidarity.

With the introduction of luxury hotels, health spas, holiday villages, and time-sharing in summer resorts—Petro Kent, Club Armoni, Club Flipper—not only were the traditional architectural designs abandoned, but people's leisure-time activities also changed dramatically. Upper middle-class Turks enjoy frequenting American-style bars, eating out in sumptuous restaurants, enjoying swimming pools and saunas, playing tennis and golf, and buying time-shares in exclusive clubs or even summer

homes. When Conrad Hilton opened a hotel in Istanbul in 1955, proudly declaring that “Each of our hotels . . . is a Little America,” he could hardly have foreseen that, eventually, all luxury hotels in Turkey would become “little Americas” replacing the traditional lifestyle with the art of living in the American way: sophisticated, splendid, and dream-like. More and more Turkish families are buying package tours, even on instalment plans, to get away during religious or national holidays. This is a sobering change from the past, when they would instead join relatives or visit their neighbors and acquaintances to strengthen social solidarity.

Mastering the art of living in the American way could not be consummated without exchanging the traditional living quarters for new homes that look more like American homes. These homes are often located in suburban settlements that mushroomed throughout the 1970s and later. The demand for a car, and often a second car, has increased car sales as well as related automobile services such as roadside gas stations fully equipped with fast food restaurants and drugstores. National and international corporate institutions use these suburban settlements to exploit more fully Turkish fascination with American popular culture, with the promise of a novel lifestyle and culture. Among such other suburbias as Ataköy Marina, Bahçeşehir (Garden City) in Istanbul, Venetian Houses in Izmir, Mutluköy (Happy Village) in Ankara, Bilkent (City of Knowledge) is unique. This mind-numbingly monotonous suburban cityscape is crowned with Bilkent Plaza and Shopping Center and Sports International, offering prestige and a high standard of comfort combined with a unique aesthetic and efficient management. Major cities are rapidly expanding into sprawling suburbs, which seriously threaten social intercourse. When they are not out visiting shopping complexes, overworked family members remain within their homes, surrounded by remote-controlled TV sets and videos, or in their gardens where they fuss over barbeques and sip scotch or gin and tonic.

Affluent Turkish youth of the 1960s were already exposed to American popular culture when they were children through comic books and movies. Since their upper-middle-class parents could afford to send them to private schools, they learned English, danced to rock 'n' roll, listened to the Platters and Pat Boone, and wore bobby-sox, loafers, and sweaters. In the 1990s the younger members of this cohort, known as the TV generation, have grown up watching *The Muppet Show* or Disney cartoons and consuming the products of Walt Disney industries. Thus, at early ages, they are exposed to the mentality and way of life Disney's cartoons reflect: the reconstructions of world folklore and children's literature highlighted with American images and values. The older ones watch American-made movies or spend hours at home playing computer games

such as *Mortal Combat*. It is not surprising that their constant exposure to American cultural icons has bred more familiarity with Pocahontas, Ninja Turtles, Batman, and Terminator than with Deli Dumrul, the Turkish Robin Hood of Dede Korkut Stories. Also underappreciated are Oğuz Khan, Keloğlan, and Hodja Nasrettin, the well-known folk heroes, and *Karagöz* and *Hacivat*, the two renowned characters of the traditional shadow theater. Their outdoor entertainments are provided with playgrounds within malls or miniature Disneylands such as Tatilya/Republic of Entertainment in Istanbul. Similarly, most of the children's magazines and literature are of American origin and accordingly mold the mentality of Turkish children so that they grow up Americanized. While being conditioned as potential consumers of American cultural products, they are estranged from their oral tradition and from their cultural heritage.

Ensnared by the allure of a remote-controlled lifestyle, Turkish youth are effectively turned into couch potatoes. This amounts to America enacting cultural imperialism via mass media, winning the hearts and minds of Turkish youths. Dressed in blue jeans and Caterpillar brand sport shoes, Turkish youths are indistinguishable from their American counterparts—both in their appearance and, to a large extent, in their collective mentality. In addition to changes in physical appearance, words and expressions such as “prestige,” “image,” “cool!” “take care,” “what’s up?” and “what’s in it for me?” have seeped into common use among Turkish youth, who are fully aware of the social and economic currency such language implies. Even worse is the fervent desire for U.S. citizenship. Pressed by economic difficulties and influenced by the media, which presents the United States as a land of opportunity and affluence, a majority of high school and even university graduates apply for the lottery organized by the American Immigration Office.

The spread of American popular culture, primarily among the upper-middle-class and peripherally among the lower-class Turkish population has created in its wake an opposition to the ideology behind it. The resurgence of fundamentalism in recent years which poses a serious threat to secularism, is responsible for creating the rift that has opened up between the Americanized privileged class and the lower middle class and poor. The fundamentalist Welfare Party has increased its power by claiming to be able to procure equality, well-being, and prosperity for all, as opposed to the capitalistic system, which, according to them, caters to the ambitions for success and prosperity of the privileged few. After the demise of the Welfare Party in January 1998, the newly founded Virtue Party continued to preach “just order” over and against “imitative order.” The major issue they have brought forward is the headscarf that all the Muslim women should wear in public according to

the fundamentalists. Demonstrations by high school and university students who insisted on entering their classrooms wearing their headscarves culminated in an event that provoked a strong response in the Parliament as well as hot public debates: The Virtue Party candidate from Istanbul—Merve Kavakçı—came to the Parliament wearing her headscarf, in defiance of the Reforms of Atatürk and the Constitution. Ironically, it was soon discovered that she was an American citizen, which disqualified her for membership in the Turkish Parliament anyway. A similarly provocative stance was taken by the organizers of a fashion show in Adana, during which the models appeared on the podium wearing headscarves and carrying posters of Atatürk, shown with his mother and wife whose hair was covered.

Another significant reaction to American popular culture is the phenomenology of *kitsch* or *arabesque*, which emerged as a socioeconomic side effect of the Americanization process.<sup>13</sup> From 1975 and into the eighties, *arabesque* came to define a lifestyle, generally of people who emigrated from rural areas to urban centers and faced certain—primarily economic—problems of adapting to the new urban bourgeois lifestyle: they could neither conserve their own cultural values and systems in this setting nor melt into the upper-middle class.<sup>14</sup> Caught midway between, they developed their own version of popular culture. Certain kinds of objects, furniture, and costume became the signatures of their new way of life as, unable to afford the accoutrements of the upper middle class, they found refuge and cultural identification in reproductions of them.<sup>15</sup>

This, the internalization of American popular culture by the influential segment of the Turkish population has had some undesirable consequences: the dissolution of moral norms and social values, the disintegration of traditional lifestyles that define cultural identity, the creation of cultural discrepancy between the Americanized and the traditionally oriented groups/classes, and the drastic modification of the nature of Turkish popular culture. Traditional popular culture was a bulwark against the hegemony of pressure groups of wealth and power. It expresses the hopes of the oppressed for a better world and of their struggles to achieve it, as represented by *The Epic of Köroğlu*, *The Epic of Çakırcalı Mehmet Efe*, or the folk poetry of Yunus Emre. Now, however, the oppositional nature of Turkish popular culture has been corroded, and that culture has been transformed into an instrument of class hegemony. The United States, self-proclaimed champion of individualism, independence and democracy, has, through its spread of global consumerism, quite undemocratically contributed to the erosion of distinctive national cultures.

## Notes

1. John O' Sullivan, *National Review* 44, no. 1 (1992):6.
2. Turgut Özal, who served as the prime minister of Turkey from 1983 to 1989, foregrounded "economic pragmatism" in his foreign policy. He was the eighth president of Turkey 1989–1993.
3. Ahmet Oktay, *Türkiyede Popüler Kültür* (Popular Culture in Turkey) (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi, 1994), 77.
4. Concern for the cultural ramifications of introducing the American way of life to Turkey was expressed by Naim Tiralı in his short story collection *America for 25 Cents* (1948). Similarly, Cevat Fehmi Başkut's play *Paydos* (It Is Over), written and staged in the same year, "is the first play that criticizes the get-rich-quick mentality and the social status it can provide, which negate all traditional norms and cultural values." Addressing the wife of the idealist schoolteacher, the wife of the smart swindler summarizes the consumer mentality that will prevail in Turkey in the years to come: "How many refrigerators do you have at home? We have two!!" The playwright draws attention to social and cultural deterioration resulting from the towering importance of the pursuit of money and power as absolute values. See *Cumhuriyetin 75 Yılı* (75 Years of the Republic), ed., Feridun Akin (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi, 1999), 1:313.
5. Adnan Menderes was among the four who founded the Democrat Party on 7 January 1946. He became prime minister when the Democrat Party won the elections in 1950 and was instrumental in the implementation of a liberal economic policy based on private enterprise and capital.
6. A detailed analysis of the introduction of Turkey to the American way of life is provided by Ahmet Oktay, 77–98.
7. Alemdar Korkmaz and İrfan Erdoğan, *Popüler Kültür ve İletişim* (Popular Culture and Communication) (Ankara: Ümit, 1994), 9.
8. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge, 1993) 1.
9. According to the 1997 research conducted by Piar Gallup, 43.2 percent of the people are watching TV, 67.5 percent foreign soap operas, 78.6 percent American-made films, and 53.7 percent talk show/entertainment programs (Istanbul: Piar Gallup Research Co., 1997) 114, 116–17.
10. Susan Marling, *American Affair: The Americanization of Britain* (London: Boxtree, 1993) 87.
11. According to statistical data obtained in 1997, the percentage of the people who drink cola is 63.9, as opposed to those who drink ayran, 23.8. Similarly, the percentage of those who drink beer is 13.2, whereas those who drink *raki* is 9.1 (Istanbul: Piar Gallup Research Co., 1997) 192–94.
12. Michael Miller, *The Bon Marche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 206–7.
13. *Arabesque*, literally "of the lower class" or "unrefined taste," also refers to a kind of music that emerged in the 1960s, which has compositional patterns like those of Arabic music tones, utterly different from Turkish classical and folk music.
14. Filiz Yenişehirlioğlu, "Kitsch, Arabesque, Popular Aesthetics . . .": *Identity, Marginality, Space*, ed. Z. Aktüre and B. Junod (Ankara: Middle East Technical University, 1992), 81.
15. Hasan Bülent Kahraman, *ibid.*, 84.