

From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: American Cultural Influences in Turkey

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The infiltration of American culture into the cultures of other nations is a well-known phenomenon which creates a wide range of emotions in the cultural arbiters of nations on the receiving end. The fervent crusade of the French to eradicate such Americanisms as *le weekend* is a good example of this, but France is not the only recipient of this sort of cultural import. In Turkey, the American cultural influence is strong and even pervasive in certain segments of society, and sometimes reaches amusing dimensions. Nowhere is this influence stronger or more prevalent than in Istanbul, a cosmopolitan city since ancient times, and my hometown.

Turkey is an open society that encourages cultural exchange, and Turkish people have the opportunity to watch American movies, read American novels, and see American icons in person. In Istanbul alone there are annual film, music, and arts festivals that bring the best of the world to Turkish audiences. As a result, educated Turkish people are surprisingly familiar with American culture. For instance, at the Istanbul Jazz Festival in June 1995, I listened to Branford Marsalis and was amazed to watch the capacity crowd break into wild applause when the band played a tape of Maya Angelou reciting her poetry. This year the same festival features David Sanborn. Michael Jackson was in Istanbul in September 1993, and even Zamfir—of the pan flute fame—has played there. “*Jurassic Park*” was a smash hit and has since inspired a dinosaur theme park.

The assault of American cultural elements is reinforced with the ready availability of American goods and services. Today in Istanbul, you can brush your teeth with Colgate, sip a cup of Lipton tea, and rush to work wearing your Dexter wing tips. Or you can drive your Jeep Grand Cherokee, which will set you apart from the merely wealthy in their ubiquitous BMWs. At lunch you can slather your sandwich with Kraft mayo, wash it down with a Sprite, and then dash into the store for a copy of the Turkish edition of *PC World*. If you're craving sweets, try Baskin Robbins. Of course, you can satisfy your nicotine fix practically at every street corner where Marlboros are peddled. And if you can sneak out of work early, you can catch the latest episode of “*The Bold and the Beautiful*,” dubbed in Turkish.

The language cannot escape this bombardment

of American influences. Many of the hip high school and college students love to pepper their speech with English words, and there are many other words which have been more or less adopted into Turkish, sometimes with new phoneticized spellings, such as: *otantik* (authentic), *agresif* (aggressive), *sofistike* (sophisticated), *medya* (media), *telekomünikasyon* (telecommunication), *versiyon* (version), *aktivasyon* (activation), *konfigürasyon* (configuration), *sponsor*, etc. These are not yet in dictionaries, but clearly in the vernacular and in trendy glossy magazines.

In an open society in the global economy, this influence is inevitable, and perhaps even to be expected. What is not expected is the stamp of prestige that is put on all things American. Sometimes this association of prestige takes funny turns. For instance, my favorite kabob restaurant in my home district in Istanbul was torn down in order to build a brand new, two-story McDonald's, complete with a playground. But the restaurant has become the playground of hip, upper-class “twentysomethings,” clad in identical Levi's 501 jeans, who congregate at the small tables to socialize.

The same transformation has occurred at Pizza Hut as well. I found this out a few years ago, when a Turkish friend visiting the U.S. insisted on being taken to Pizza Hut. Once there, however, she was dismayed at the appearance of the patrons and explained that the Pizza Hut in Istanbul is quite the place to be; an enclave for trendy *enteller* (intellectuals). The mostly working-class families at my local Pizza Hut, in non-designer garb, apparently did not measure up.

Turkish retailers also wish to imbue their stores with the same perception of prestige by giving their stores English names, a practice which sometimes results in screamingly funny—albeit unintentional—bloopers. Beymen, an upscale designer clothing company similar to Ralph Lauren, has opened furnishing stores named Beymen Home. Its stylish children's apparel stores are called Beymen Kids. On the other end of the spectrum, there is Tiffany Tomato, a fashion store. Having seen “*Breakfast at Tiffany's*” several times, I must admit I have a hard time dispelling from my mind bizarre images of Audrey Hepburn bedecked in red, ripe

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fruit, a la Carmen Miranda.

But Tiffany Tomato pales in comparison to another example which is nearby. Tucked under a condominium building is a small store called the BM Club. No, it is not an outlet for commodities or fiber supplements, but a clothing boutique. Originally a locally owned subsidiary of Beymen, the store still operates under the same name, long after Beymen figured out the connotations of the name and dropped it.

Absurdities such as these are bound to happen with the strong influence of American culture and pervasive perception of class, prestige, and privilege associated with all things American in the minds of some people. But like everything else, there are two sides to this coin.

On the positive side, American cultural elements from music to film serve a valid purpose. They enhance the global awareness of Turkish people, and the true *enteller* (intellectuals) are able to evaluate them in a critical fashion. Moreover, the popularity of Western culture helps confirm Turkish people's national identity as bona fide members of the Western world. In view

of Turkey's break from the Islamic Ottoman Empire and the current political pressures of resurgent Islamic forces both in the Middle East and within Turkish society, this reaffirmation is most important to many people, especially the young and the educated. Indeed, many college students and graduates are concerned about the future of Turkey as a secular country, and seem to take refuge in the symbols of American culture.

On the negative side, however, symbols of American culture are appropriated and blatantly flaunted by certain segments of society as symbols of superiority over more traditional people. Supporters of pro-Islamic policies correctly identify this attitude of snobbery as a slight of their cultural values and label it corrupt. This perception then provokes them into yet more rigid political and social fundamentalist positions. In vivid contrast to the likes of Tiffany Tomato, *tesettür* (being veiled) shops have been sprouting up to sell lengthy, traditional Islamic coats and head coverings to women. Perhaps the next decade will show how Turkey will resolve the increasing internal tension between its imported Western influences and home-grown Islamic culture.

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