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# Strangers to and Producers of Their Own Culture: American Popular Culture and Turkish Young People

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American popular culture is virtually everywhere, including Turkey. Turkey is a close ally of the United States and American cultural products have long been present in Turkey. How does the presence of American popular culture in Turkey affect young people? Employing a series of focus groups comprised of Turkish university students, we explored the meanings they attach to American popular culture and the place it has in their lives. What emerged was a portrait of Turkish young people constructing themselves and their imaginations from a multiplicity of traditions, including American, into an ever changing, shifting whole. The Turkish young people in this study seem to exemplify this as they blend their lives, not always easily or smoothly, around Turkish, American, European and numerous other cultures.

**KEYWORDS** popular culture, America, Turkey, imagination, university students, focus groups

There is little doubt that American popular culture products are virtually everywhere in the world today. Since the end of World War II, the United States has exported its popular culture; in fact, it was an important aspect of Cold War foreign policy (Crothers, 2006: 1). Since the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the spread of American popular culture has intensified and this phenomenon is, at the same time, both driving and driven by globalization. With the rise of global markets, American popular culture has found its way into more and more peoples' lives.

It is now not uncommon to see Coca-Cola and American television and films in the remotest corners of the globe. McDonalds has restaurants in over 100 countries, and while Coca-Cola's market share has slipped in recent years, it is still dominant

the world over (Fairfield and Nguyen, 2007). American films are dominant throughout the world, both in theatres and on DVDs and videotapes. The top twenty-five grossing films of all time include only one non-American film, and the same is true for DVDs and videos (Crothers, 2006: 56). This pre-eminence continues in music and television, where American groups and American forms of music — rock-n-roll, country and rap — overwhelmingly capture consumer dollars. In terms of television, three-quarters of all international spending for programs goes to US companies (Crothers, 2006: 56). Clothing labels such as Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Nike, and Converse, let alone blue jeans themselves, have become popular items far beyond the borders of the US. While the prominence of America popular culture products around the world is celebrated by free market proponents, this has also led to a number of concerns and conflicts.

As Appadurai asserts, ‘the central problem of today’s global interaction is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization’ (Appadurai, 1996: 32). In particular, mass communication technologies, of which popular culture is a part, are seen as leading to the development of mass consumer societies where traditional forces of socialization are displaced by the forces of the mass media and popular culture. Those who are concerned about homogenization fear the influence of corporate mass media entertainment and its potential for replacing local culture with a monolithic consumer capitalist one. More specifically, some worry about the dominance of American popular culture and its potential to colonize local cultures, transforming them into little Americas (Crothers, 2006: 25). All of these concerns, and variations of each, have been prevalent in Turkey for some time (Buken, 2000: 243; Oktay, 2002: 21).

Some claim that, in 1946, when the USS Missouri repatriated the deceased Turkish Ambassador to the US, the vessel also brought to Turkey the American way of life (Buken, 2000: 242; Oktay, 2002: 42). In actuality, Turkey has had contact with the US and been exposed to American culture for more than a century (Buken, 2000: 243; ‘Uncle Sam and Turkey’, 1895: 21). An 1895 *New York Times* article titled ‘Uncle Sam and Turkey: Our Diplomatic Relations with the Ottoman Empire’ relates how relatively widespread the contact was between the then Ottomans and the Americans. The contentious issue of missionaries and reports of the harassment of missionaries, including the burning of a missionary institution near Smyrna (Izmir today), points to the fact that contact also took place outside of Istanbul. Furthermore, American publishers were reported to have complained about the censoring of their publications, while the Sultan protested the proliferation of Protestant schools (‘Uncle Sam and Turkey’, 1895: 21). It is interesting to note that two American high schools founded in the nineteenth century, Robert College and Üsküdar American, are still in existence and considered among the best high schools in Turkey.

In Turkey today, America’s presence is felt nowhere more than through its films, television programs and music, or what Appadurai terms mediascapes (1996: 35). Mediascapes are the imagery generated by cinema, television, print media and advertising that travel the world over (Appadurai, 1996: 35). American films dominate at many theatres while Turkish television channels and radio stations air plenty of American shows and music. An equally important part of the puzzle consists of the commodities that are advertised through mediascapes. In the major cities McDonalds,

Burger King, Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken are widely available while Levis, Converse and Nikes as well as other American inspired fashions are extremely popular with many Turkish young people. The electronic media and the mediascapes they generate are not simply items for consumption; rather, they destabilize modern subjectivities and at the same time 'provide resources for self-imaging as an everyday social project' (Appadurai, 1996: 4). This is precisely what is seen in the young people in this study as they attempt to construct themselves and their imaginations from a multiplicity of sources, one of which is American popular culture.

Despite what may appear to be the overwhelming presence of American popular culture, it is important to recognize that the influence of Europe is also strongly felt in Turkey. Certainly this is aided by the fact that Turkey is, after all, on Europe's door step. Turkey has long aspired to join the European Union and, since at least the founding of the Republic in 1923, has attempted to fashion itself as a European country. Since the 1970s, millions of Turks have gone to Germany and other European countries to work, with many returning regularly and bringing with them European products and further knowledge of European culture. Current estimates place the number of Turks living in Germany alone at more than 2 million (Küçükcan, 2006). American popular culture may appear to monopolize the marketplace but it must also compete with other popular cultures for the attention and dollars of Turkish consumers. In fact, the United States 'is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes' (Appadurai, 1996: 31).

To state that somehow American popular culture does not affect Turkish culture would be foolish. Undoubtedly it does, but the question remains how and in what ways. The question that animated this study centred on trying to illuminate to what extent Turkish university students consume American popular culture products, the meanings they ascribe to these products and the place these products have in their lives. What emerged was that the young people in our study felt that they were both strangers to and producers of their own culture. Some aspects of both the disjuncture and connection they feel towards their own culture they attribute to the effects of American popular culture. Yet, in spite of the presence of McDonalds, Coke, Pepsi, and Nike as well as a television channel that is dedicated almost exclusively to American television programming (CNBC-e) during prime-time evening hours, Turkey is far from becoming a 'little America'. Rather than a simple take over, or a Huntington style 'clash of civilizations' (1993: 22), American culture has become indigenized in Turkey (Appadurai, 1996: 32). In fact, globalization in the arena of popular culture is a process 'that enables coexistence, rather than clashes, between the global and the local' (Özbudun and Keyman, 2002: 317). Regardless of ideology and specificity of consumption choices, young people from all aspects of Turkish society have developed a consumer identity which embraces 'Western consumer culture and its symbols' (Özbudun and Keyman, 2002: 317).

At the time that the globalization of culture appears to be leading to a more single homogeneous culture modelled on western values, these same processes also yield alternative local cultural traditions. In Turkey, one of the alternatives that has surfaced has centred on a resurgence of Islam (Özbudun and Keyman, 2002: 301). The ruling political party in Turkey has Islamic roots, the wives of both the President and Prime Minister wear Islamic style headscarves and the increase in the number of

women who cover their heads is noticeable. Despite the rise in a visibly Islamic identity, this subjectivity no longer signals backwardness; rather, there has been an 'emergence of cultural capital used by Islamic identity in terms of fashion, music, art, and tourism, as well as an emergence of a consumerist Islamic identity acting as an economic citizen, integrated into shopping mall culture, making use of technology, and understanding the symbolic power of money' (Özbudun and Keyman, 2002: 301). Like their secular counterparts, Islamic oriented young people are deeply invested in the new western-style consumer identity that has developed in Turkey in recent years. Turkey is today, as it has been for many centuries, a hybrid culture blending a multiplicity of traditions into an ever-changing, shifting whole. Turkish young people seem to exemplify this as they blend their lives, and imaginations, not always easily or smoothly, around Turkish, American, European and numerous other cultures.

## Procedure

The core of this research is based on a series of focus groups conducted with Turkish university students. There were eight focus groups in all, each one consisting of between six and nine participants. Overall, there were sixty-one participants. All of the participants were university students at Turkish universities. They ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-four and the groups were all comprised of both men and women. The focus groups took the form of group discussions led by a moderator. The average length of the discussions was three hours and all communication took place in Turkish.

In an attempt to create a diverse pool, the students were chosen from both different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. In terms of education, students were grouped according to whether or not they had attended a traditional high school where classes are taught exclusively in Turkish or a school where some or all of the classes are taught in a foreign language. The same grouping was also made based on the university where they were enrolled. The students who participated in this study attended a wide number of universities, both public and private, as well as studying numerous different subject areas.

The other variable used to constitute the focus groups centred on socioeconomic status. The distinction between groups was quite basic and consisted of upper-middle, middle and lower-middle class. The division between the groups was based on the type of education of each participant combined with their parents' occupations and education. The lower-middle class groups consisted of those students who attended traditional Turkish high schools and were attending Turkish universities, while their parents had a high school education and were employed primarily in small businesses. The upper-middle class group, on the other hand, was defined by university-educated parents who were upper management executives or professionals, such as doctors, lawyers or university professors; the upper-middle class students were attending schools where some or all of the teaching is offered in a foreign language.

Our intention in composing groups along educational and socioeconomic lines was an attempt to gather together 'naturally occurring group(s) of like minded people' (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 80). The importance of this relies on a view of individuals, including the young people in this study, as 'not . . . an aggregate of atomized opinions or attitudes but as individuals located in concrete social groups who

construct meaningful social action partly through the discursive interrogation of texts' (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 82). Another aspect of this process is the mass media which through 'conditions of collective reading, criticism and pleasure' create a 'community of interest' (Appadurai, 1996: 8). In this respect, the groups that we composed can be viewed as largely homogeneous and therefore representative, at least of their social group, while at the same time still maintaining some semblance of individuality.

Our use of focus group discussions was an attempt to move beyond simply attempting to measure the impact of American popular culture on a group of Turkish young people or determine how many American products these university students consumed. Rather, we sought to begin to understand the meaning they attach to these products and the place these products hold in their lives. As such, the focus groups represented an attempt to simulate the kinds of everyday conversations where meaning is generated. While focus groups are problematic, they do 'generate discussion, and so reveal the meanings surrounding an issue — both the meanings that people read into the discussion topic and how they negotiate those meanings' (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 97). Moreover, rather than an attempt to collect data in the form of raw numbers, we viewed these discussions as providing an opportunity to examine and unravel the discourses that these young people employ surrounding their relationships with American popular culture.

The actual discussions took place in an environment purposefully designed for focus groups and interviews. All of the sessions were both videotaped and recorded. The conversations were conducted around a large table, food and drinks were served, and participants could smoke freely. The conversations were led by a moderator and initially were quite free flowing with the students largely determining the direction of the discussion. However, the moderator then gradually employed a 'funnelling' technique, pushing the groups toward the topic of American popular culture while at the same time allowing for as natural a discussion as possible. In order to stimulate discussion and simultaneously 'funnel' the participants toward the actual topic of discussion, the groups were initially asked to reflect upon themselves and their generation. They provided quite detailed descriptions of what they felt were the characteristics of Turkish young people, university students in particular. They were then asked to discuss their parents' generation and any differences or similarities they saw between their own generation and that of their parents. Focusing primarily on what they saw as the significant differences between themselves and their parents' generation, they discussed what they felt was the source of the differences. Finally, the conversations turned to whether or not these young people felt the impact of foreign cultures on their own, specifically that of the United States. This aspect of the group discussions covered their relationship to American products, how they feel about them, what they like and do not like, and what their attitudes were toward the United States in general.

### **Strangers to our own culture**

As a starting point for our discussions, participants were asked to describe themselves, their age group and how they compared to their parents' generation. In all groups, regardless of class or education type, the initial description the Turkish young

people gave of themselves was decidedly negative. They characterized themselves as apolitical, ignorant, discontented, easily bored, easily influenced, imitative and brand conscious. It is also interesting to note that they viewed themselves as consumers and that this was something that they considered negative. Although the overall portrait of these young people was negative, they did list some positive traits about themselves such as being friendly, fun-loving, social, technologically proficient, creative and adaptable. While there was some general agreement on the overall picture of this group, there were also some decided class divisions.

Overwhelmingly, the young people who described themselves as belonging to a lower socioeconomic group were far more negative about themselves and Turkish young people in general. They attributed more negative characteristics and fewer positive ones to young people than their counterparts originating in better economic circumstances. Those coming from higher economic groups were also more worried about their futures, particularly their careers and status, than those with less class privilege. The young people from the lower socioeconomic status groups were more concerned with simply finding a job — as opposed to a career — and earning enough money to be comfortable. Finally, in what is clearly an expression of class position, the majority of students in this study who attended universities where the language of instruction is English felt that they gave more importance to their physical appearance and that they liked to show off. The vast majority of universities where lectures are in English are private and their tuition ranges from \$10,000–\$15,000 per year. In a country where the per capita income is slightly less than \$10,000 a year, these represent enormous sums that most cannot afford ('Turks Rank Fifty-fourth', 2008).

Asking the students to reflect upon the similarities and differences between their generation and that of their parents brought into high relief many of their attitudes about their own age group and their attachment, or the lack thereof, to Turkish culture. In comparison to the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of their contemporaries, the students in this study were decidedly positive about the time in which their parents were of university age. Generally they characterized their parents as more responsible, idealistic, respectful, better read, consuming less and not imitating other cultures. In the words of one of the participants, 'they are the exact opposite of us' (Foreign University, Foreign High School, Upper Class Socioeconomic Background).<sup>1</sup> These young people, almost without exception, related an enormous generational difference between themselves and their parents' age group. In this sharp contrast, however, there is an almost nostalgic idealization of the past. The glowing terms with which these young people described their parents' youth and characteristics relates both their apparent admiration for them and their deep dissatisfaction with themselves and their own generation. At the same time, one participant importantly pointed out the decidedly different circumstances that have resulted from an enormous amount of change that has taken place over the last generation or two: 'They haven't had everything given to them. Their lives haven't been as easy as ours. For them, establishing a career was not a matter of ambition but necessity' (Foreign University, Foreign High School, Upper Class Socioeconomic Background). Another remarked that 'life was more difficult at that time' (Turkish University, Turkish High School, Upper Middle Class Socioeconomic Background).

One of the more interesting splits between the generations, as well as between some of the young people, centred on the extent to which they felt themselves to be strangers to their own culture. One described the older generation as 'not having become estranged from their own culture', which of course implies that the younger age group has (Foreign University, Turkish High School, Lower Middle Class Socioeconomic Background). This feeling of estrangement was evident in more than half of the students and defied boundaries of class and type of education. Even those students educated at classic Turkish high schools and universities, where one might argue that exposure to the US and other western cultures might have less emphasis, expressed this same sentiment. Yet, in a seeming contradiction, a majority of those in the lower socioeconomic groups also characterized themselves as nationalistic.

While in no way attempting to discount what these young people described as their feelings of alienation from their culture, it seems to us that there is a connection between their idealization of the past and their parents' generation and the extent to which they feel estranged from the culture. Their narration of the past, in the form of describing their parents' era, related a rather monolithic view of Turkish culture at that time: a culture where there was little conflict (with the exception of the social upheaval of the 1970s), a more innocent time when entertainment centred on theatre, classical music and picnicking. Importantly, a time largely free of outside influences. It was a time when people were more respectful of each other, family ties were stronger, and traditions were adhered to. There seems to be no small amount of longing for this by-gone era, which is a popular refrain in Turkey.

While much of this portrayal of the recent Turkish past may be accurate it is equally important to acknowledge the cleavages along class, education, religious and ethnic lines that riddled the very same past. As part of the nation-building process which began with the founding of the Republic in 1923, the state has consistently produced and reinforced a singular view of Turkish culture. It was not actually until the 1990s, with the end of the state-controlled monopoly of television and radio and the entrance of Turkey into the global media market, that the monolithic image of Turkish culture that was advanced by the state-run media monopoly was undermined (Şahin and Aksoy, 1993: 33). Despite the widespread availability of diverse media today, both Turkish and foreign, these young people are still exposed to the state-sponsored view of Turkish culture in school and on state-run television which now exists alongside privately-owned channels as well as satellite television. Yet, as the conversations moved on to the actual impact of American culture on them, their consuming habits, etc., it became clear that these university students have not simply traded Turkish culture for American culture but are creating a hybrid; a creolized culture which perhaps better reflects Turkish culture — a culture that has never been singular or hermetically sealed from the outside but rather built on diversity.

### **Lifestyle: Food, clothing, entertainment and language**

University students in Turkey, like their counterparts in many parts of the world, seem to prefer a fast-paced social life centred on swiftly changing entertainment activities. In a city such as Istanbul, where this research was conducted, the entertainment opportunities are virtually endless (although it should be noted that Istanbul is the most expensive city in Turkey and costs rival those of any major European



city). Without a doubt, the focus for these young people is centred on popular culture types of entertainment in contrast to more classical forms such as theatre and opera. This was another major distinction they drew between themselves and their parents' generation.

A typical weekend night out for our participants transpires roughly as follows: Eat some type of fast food, although not American style such as McDonalds or Burger King, then proceed to a bar where cheaper alcohol is served in preparation for the rest of the night. After that, they typically move on to clubs where they can listen to live music and dance, often moving between clubs in a single night rather than staying in one place. To bring the night to a close, the young people often eat once again or go to a traditional restaurant specializing in tripe soup, popularly believed to be a hangover prevention, before returning home.

Although the participants in this study professed a preference for fast food, they were equally clear that the preference is for Turkish fast food. Rather than hamburgers and pizza, the students in this study expressed a decided tendency for traditional Turkish fast foods such as döner (roasted lamb/beef on a vertical spit), dürüm (thinly sliced meat wrapped in thin bread) and kebab. Across all groups, regardless of income or education, the students did not view American fast food, such as Pizza Hut, McDonalds or Burger King, as quality food 'appropriate' for university students. Some admitted to frequenting these restaurants when they were in high school and they felt that these eateries were more suitable for teenagers and children. The young people asserted that, although fast food is currently a global phenomenon that originated in the United States, their motivation for eating fast food was not an attempt to consume things American but because of financial and time constraints. The students claimed they did not have enough time for a sit-down meal at a restaurant; at the same time, by consuming fast food, several students claimed they could save money for a better meal in the future. It should be noted that, with rare exception, Turkish fast food is more widely available and much less expensive than its imported counterpart. At the time that this research was conducted we were not aware of the presence of foreign fast food franchises on any Turkish university campus.

The one notable exception to the inclination for fast food among our participants was a traditional entertainment activity known as Fasil, which has become enormously popular in recent years. Fasil takes place in restaurants dedicated specifically to this activity and consists of a multi-course meal which includes alcohol to be consumed leisurely over several hours. The meal is accompanied by groups who usually play classical Turkish music. The attraction of Fasil is its intense sociality. Groups of friends go to Fasil and diners are encouraged and expected to sing along with the musicians. Moreover, the students mentioned that there exists a special term, *fasil muhabbeti*, for the conversations that take place during Fasil. Part of what is interesting about the popularity of Fasil amongst young people like those in this study is that everything about Fasil is traditional, from the food on the set menu to the music. This stands in stark contrast to their apparent preference for all things popular. While Fasil has become quite popular recently, the students in this study did make it clear that due to the expense, ranging from US\$50 to US\$100 per person, this is an activity that they do not engage in often, particularly those from the lower middle class.

The significance of fast food in the lives of these students reflects the relative ease with which foreign originated trends have been adapted and integrated into the lives of Turkish young people. Turkish fast food is a fully Turkified version of what may have originated in the US. Furthermore, fast food, Turkish and American, and traditional entertainment such as Fasil, exist side by side in the lives of the participants with little or no differentiation on their part. Ironically, during our discussions of lifestyle and consumption, the students also consumed huge amounts of Coca-Cola and smoked almost exclusively American cigarettes — habits that they themselves never commented on. Of course, Turkish tobacco is famous the world over and many American cigarettes have historically included it in their blends. These apparent disjunctions and incongruities speak to the almost seamless way that these young people blend, adapt and change the products of Turkish and other cultures, often creating new variations.

One of the more interesting intersections between Turkish and American culture is represented by the Efes Pilsen Blues Festival. Begun in 1990, the annual festival now in its twentieth year brings well-known American blues artists to Turkey. The concerts are extremely well attended, primarily by young people, and are considered one of the high points in the musical calendar each year. Perhaps what is most interesting about this festival is not its popularity but the extent to which its following now stretches the length and breadth of Turkey. The festival began with two concerts in Istanbul but now consists of twenty-three shows in places such as the primarily Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, Trabzon on the Black Sea and the conservative heartland city of Kayseri. Not only does it appear that consumption of American popular culture has increased in recent decades but the reach has also expanded. American culture, in various forms, has always been present in the major metropolitan cities of Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara, but not everywhere across Turkey. Now it is far more common to find American music, films, clothing and fast food far outside what have been considered the cosmopolitan centres of the country.

While going out for food, drinks, and/or music represented the major entertainment for the participants in this study, they also spent time going to the cinema and watching television. Films and television are perhaps the single area where the American impact is most felt outside the United States. Simply, the US is so dominant in these areas that it is virtually impossible to escape its reach. At the same time, much local programming, including that in Turkey, imitates and/or adapts American conventions so that, as one commentator remarked, 'American mass culture did not even feel like an import, so deeply embedded were its conventions and formulas in the consciousness and daily experience of young Europeans' (Pells, 1997: 205). Film scholar Andrew Higson adds that, 'Hollywood is not only the most internationally powerful cinema — it has also, of course, for many years been an integral and naturalized part of the national culture, or the popular imagination, of most countries in which cinema is an established entertainment form' (Higson, 1989: 39). With the exception of language, it is somewhat difficult to distinguish Turkish television from that which is imported from the US. There are numerous Turkish programmes which imitate US formats, from talk shows to reality and game shows.

Despite this, television in Turkey is still dominated by Turkish-produced programming rather than relying on imported programming from the US or Europe. Currently, several of the most popular programmes are dramas of a particularly Turkish nature such as *Elveda Rumeli*, *Bu Kalp Seni Unutur Mu?* and *Aşk-i Memnu*. *Elveda*

*Rumli* (Goodbye Rumeli) and *Bu Kalp Seni Unutur Mu?* (Would This Heart Forget You?) are both historical in nature. *Elveda* chronicles the lives of a village family in what was Eastern Rumelia (modern day Macedonia) in 1897 against the backdrop of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, whereas *Bu Kalp* addresses the turbulence of the post-1980 coup era in Turkey. Ironically, *Elveda Rumeli* is in many ways a retelling of *Fiddler on the Roof* with the central characters being Sütcü Ramiz (the milkman) and his five daughters. Turkish television represents another aspect of the hybridity of Turkish culture which now includes American influences as well as those of Europe and the Middle East. With 97 per cent of Turkish households in possession of at least one television, many of them with cable and satellite connections, very few escape this avenue of influences (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2009).

Mixing, hybridity and creolization are seen nowhere more than in fashion, and the participants in this study exemplified this. Interestingly, the majority of the participants asserted that they saw America as the largest influence in terms of fashion, but they believe fashion trends actually originate in Europe. One student put it in the following way: 'Europe creates fashion and the US carries it out' (Foreign University, Turkish High School, Upper Class Socioeconomic Background). Another student linked America's influence in fashion to the prominence of American television and film. In the eyes of these students, not even what many might view as being American style can be considered purely American; rather, American style itself is a hybrid form that indirectly reflects European influences.

At the same time that these university students recognized the creolized nature of fashion, they also, without exception, agreed that for young people there exists one dominant style. The style consists of the American-inspired desire for comfortable clothing comprised largely of jeans and sports shoes. While comfort seemed to be the largest fashion concern of those in this study, a number of students, not surprisingly primarily those attending private universities and coming from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, also acknowledged what they described as an 'obsession' with brand name clothing. Another student also remarked that 'Turks love to show off' (Turkish University, Foreign High School, Upper Class Socioeconomic Background). Although there was a concern expressed for following fashion and brand names, no specific brands were mentioned. It appears that while brand recognition is important to some of them, the origin of the brand does not seem to be of great import. While the US undoubtedly exerts some influence on the fashion choices that these young people make, it does not appear to be significant enough to create a high level of brand loyalty. It should also be noted that Turkey has a strong indigenous textile market which produces clothing for both internal consumption as well as export. While the style may be American, many of the clothes that these and other Turkish young people wear are made in Turkey from Turkish-produced textiles. Furthermore, many of the 'name brand items' that Turks display are also products of Turkey's market in designer fakes. Fashion for these university students in Turkey is not simply a matter of copying American style, rather they have adapted certain American fashion sensibilities and in many ways both literally and figuratively made them their own.

One of the most interesting aspects of the discussions with these Turkish university students was their attitude towards Turkish language and what they described as the poor language skills of Turkish youth. Perhaps what proved most surprising

was not so much the topic itself but the intensity and passion with which they spoke about language. In many ways, their own articulation of the 'problem' belied their assertions that Turkish young people speak poorly.

The single largest reason the students in his study felt that Turkish young people speak poorly centred on the infiltration of English words into the Turkish language (Foreign University, Turkish High School, Lower Middle Class Socioeconomic Background; Foreign University, Foreign High School, Upper Class Socioeconomic Background; Turkish University, Foreign High School, Upper Class Socioeconomic Background). They objected to the use of English phrases when a Turkish alternative exists. There are many Turkish alternatives provided for new and emerging technology and phenomena. The Turkish Language Council (Türk Dili Kurum) founded in 1932 based on an idea of linguistic purism is charged with ensuring the integrity of the Turkish language. Furthermore, they provide and encourage the use of Turkish origin equivalents for foreign words and phrases. What is particularly interesting about the students' objection to the use of foreign words alongside Turkish is that the Turkish language is already littered with loan words from Persian, Arabic and French origins. It seems that these existing loan words have become so naturalized that many do not view them as foreign any longer.

Perhaps further complicating the issue is the students' own relationships to English. The English language plays an interesting role in their lives. English is now required from the fourth grade on in public schools. Moreover, many of the participants have been studying English for years and some attend universities where the language of instruction is English. One young person related that English is becoming so ingrained that 'English words come out of my mouth involuntarily' (Foreign University, Turkish High School, Lower Middle Class Socioeconomic Background). Without doubt, there is a great deal of pressure for these students to learn English.

Certainly a contributing factor to the complex relationship these students have with the English language stems in part from the rapid expansion of technology, particularly cell phones, computers and the internet. All of these technologies are largely driven by English. Although Turkish translations exist for things such as Microsoft operating systems, they tend to be so inadequate and difficult to understand that many revert to the English and when speaking about computer-related matters many simply intersperse English words in their otherwise Turkish conversations. Although Turkey lags behind many countries in computer ownership and internet usage, this is an area that has increased dramatically in the last five years, the only time period for which statistics are available. In 2004 computer ownership stood at just 11 per cent, whereas by 2009 it had increased to 41 per cent (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2009).

The trend is similar for internet usage. While there still exists a disparity between rural and urban regions, rural areas are making steady gains. The same survey reported that by far the most frequent use of the internet was for information searches followed by communication. Additionally, more than half claimed to use the internet for downloading films, games and music (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2010). Given the dominance of the United States on the internet, no small amount of what people in Turkey are accessing originates from there and is in English. With such a marked increase in computer and internet access, the influence of other cultures and the

English language is only bound to increase in Turkey. Moreover, the use of English will only become further embedded as Turkish becomes an even more hybridized language, at least in the vernacular.

An additional aspect of the pressure these students feel to learn English stems from what they see as America's power in the world. This was particularly the case with those attending universities where the language of instruction is English. One remarked that we learn 'English because it is the world language and America rules the world' (Foreign University, Turkish High School, Lower Middle Class Socioeconomic Background). Some of these types of comments also seemed to contain a certain amount of resentment that they had to learn English and that it had begun to change the way they speak.

Clearly, English is one of the 'instruments of homogenization' deployed by the forces of globalization, but at the same time the language hegemony represented by English is also 'absorbed into local political and cultural economies' (Appadurai, 1996: 42). This process, however, is not without its own difficulties. Striking a decidedly personal note, another participant stated that 'Our mothers and fathers do not understand some of the terms that we use. The Turkish of their youth was different' (Foreign University, Turkish High School, Lower Middle Class Socioeconomic Background). This student's comment reveals the startling rate with which modern Turkish has and continues to evolve, and also the attendant ruptures that can occur as a result.

Despite the fact that many of the young people in this study viewed English as having a negative impact on Turkish, they still choose to use English words and study English, and nearly half of them attend universities where the language of education is English. They acknowledged that English is the dominant foreign language in Turkey and the world. According to them, part of what motivates individuals to use English is prestige, a kind of showing off. A survey of nearly 500 young people from all areas of Istanbul lends some credence to this assertion.<sup>2</sup> When the respondents were asked if they knew English, 70 per cent responded yes with nearly 50 per cent of those claiming that they were at an intermediate level in their knowledge. Given the relatively recent institution of mandatory English in the public schools and the expense of private courses and lessons, this appears to be an overstatement on the part of the participants. While prestige may be an important factor, perhaps more important for the students we spoke with was the economic demand for English speakers. All of the participants made it clear that English language skills were essential for securing a good job.

### **Producers of their own culture**

The daily lives of the students who participated in this research are living testament to the ways that 'individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern' (Appadurai, 1996: 4). From the food they eat to what they wear, how they have fun and the way they speak, these young people don't just mix and match but integrate and adapt different styles, communication patterns, approaches to food and ways of being and imagining. They are, in fact, producers of their own culture, albeit a culture largely rooted in consumerism. The culture they

are creating is influenced by the United States in numerous ways. However, Europe, and Germany in particular, also has a tremendous impact on Turkey. While these young people and others like them may adopt seemingly American styles, they do it in a very indigenized manner so that the result is Turkish fast food, American-style clothing made in Turkey and a language which is Turkish infused with English.

Despite the fears of some that Turkey will become a 'little America' or that American popular culture will overwhelm Turkish culture, there is no substantial evidence of this in the lives of the university students we interviewed. In fact, for these students there was no real love for America despite their consumption of American popular culture products. When asked what country they would like to live in for five years, very few of the participants stated that they wanted to go to the US. The majority chose European countries. None of the students who have had their entire education in English expressed any desire to live in the US. Furthermore, in the same survey of Turkish young people referred to above, participants were asked if they would like to live in the United States. Nearly 60 per cent replied no. Clearly, the love affair with things American only goes so far. This was also true of the participants in our study. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the students who had received both their high school and university education in English expressed any desire to live in the United States. One expressed it in the following way, 'We grew up with the influence of American culture, it shaped us. We feel close to them so there is no reason to go' (Foreign University, Turkish High School, Upper Class Socioeconomic Background).

Turkish culture today, while reflecting American influence, is not dominated by it. Turkish coffee culture exists alongside Starbucks, and McDonalds and Burger King compete with Turkish fast food. Turkish television shows and films share their respective screens with American and other programming. The young people in this study and others like them move back and forth between indigenous and foreign products, including American ones, and the culture that is a result of this back and forth movement embodies a multiplicity and hybridity that has characterized Turkish culture for centuries.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This refers to the focus group that this student participated in and their background. Foreign Universities refers to a university where lectures are in English, Turkish University is an institution where lectures are in Turkish. Foreign High School refers to a high school where lectures are in English while Turkish High School is a school where classes are in Turkish. The last reference is for socioeconomic background.

<sup>2</sup> This survey was conducted by students in the Department of Statistics at Kadir Has University. The survey had nearly 500 respondents ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-five. Respondents were randomly selected from neighbourhoods all over the city.

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