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After Neo-Liberal Globalization: The Great Transformation of Turkey

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Abstract

This is an examination, using a macro sociological approach, of the great transformation of Turkey in response to rising market hegemony and increasing impact of global forces. Powerful waves of globalization and market expansion are displacing domestic orientation of the Turkish economy with structures of global market regulation. A new economic orientation or vision thereby results which, in turn, further consolidates the power of globalist classes, creates conspicuous consumption as a marker of class distinctions, privileges global networks over domestic structures, and sustains domestic inequalities in Turkey.

Keywords

neo-liberal globalization, Turkey, market, economic inequality, consumerism, new middle classes

The last quarter of the twentieth century was a time of large-scale global transformations. While the increasing pace of economic globalization signaled the collapse of Keynesianism in core states and national developmentalism in the periphery, the end of the Cold War has equally transformed the political sphere. It has broken up the monopoly of nation-states on sovereignty and governance (Robinson 2004; Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2003). The global framework which resulted, which emerged fully during the 1990s, is built upon two novel premises: (1) to promote the free market project on a global scale and (2) to re-articulate the local with the global in social and political life.

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Seen in this light, Turkey's recent efforts to join the European Union and to increase her ties with the global economy reveal rapid transition on the Turkish map. Local-global links are being redefined; state-society relations are being renegotiated; and the nexus between economy and society is being restructured – all in a global setting. Hence, the Turkish social formation is increasingly tied to a cosmopolitan perspective in which the local is reshaped through global networks and by supranational structures (Keyder 1999a; Castells 2000a; Held 2000). Furthermore, the market has emerged as a key social and economic institution in the neo-liberal project, expanding its influence both in the public and private spheres.

This paper explores the great transformation of Turkey around rising market hegemony and increasing impact of global forces. During the 1970s powerful waves of globalization and market expansion displaced the domestic orientation of the Turkish economy with structures of market regulation. In turn, this new economic orientation consolidated the power of globalist classes, created conspicuous consumption as a marker of class distinctions, and prioritized global networks over domestic structures. One result is that major inequalities in Turkey are being sustained rather than reduced.

Employing a macro sociological approach, the paper first introduces the class balances which shifted in favor of propertied and globally oriented groups. Next, we outline the rising consumption ideal and the global orientation of Turkey, both of which have developed in tandem with globalization and market hegemony. In the final section we underline the social costs of a globally connected consumer society in the Turkish context, particularly by focusing on domestic social and spatial inequality.

Rise of Globalist Classes

Starting in the 1980s, class balances have shifted dramatically in favor of capital. The Turkish transformation began with expanding the freedoms of capital owners in the workplace. The Turkish political elite, like its counterparts in Latin America, launched a series of legal and economic reforms to create an export-oriented economy (Dominguez 1997; Centeno 1997; Camp 2002). Responding both to a changing international environment and domestic concerns, ruling center-right parties first integrated labor into a neo-corporatist order. Then, during the 1990s, they allowed Turkish firms to pursue extensive flexible production strategies. The result has been

a dramatic, structural adjustment to the global economy, one which undermines the power of labor and industrial unions as compared to capital.

The unrivalled authority of business classes in the workplace soon evolved into a project of ideological hegemony, which marked a historical challenge to the earlier *etatist* trajectory of Turkish social formation. Alan Richards and John Waterbury, prominent authorities on the political economy of the modern Middle East, recognize the radical rupture in the Turkish context: “[T]he consolidation of a native capitalist industrial bourgeoisie” in Turkey after 1980 has resulted in the “gradual reduction of the autonomy of the state” and guaranteed “its recapture by economic interests . . . for the first time in a Middle Eastern society” (1996:36, 43).

Nonetheless, the initial strategy of business groups was limited in scope and aimed at influencing the political decision-making process in an interest group framework. Business class organizations such as the Turkish Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association (TUSIAD) and the Turkish Union of Chambers and Stock Exchanges (TOBB) which, respectively, represent big capitalists and the interests of commerce have established close ties with the state via personal connections. In this way they secure “political favors” for the business community (Kalaycıoğlu 1994). Here Turkey shares the neo-liberal experiences of Central Andes countries: “rational legal principles reflected in the formal political sphere frequently co-existed with clientelism in informal behind-the-scenes political behavior” (Conaghan and Malloy 1994:15).

The next step taken by the Turkish bourgeoisie was more radical. Disappointed with personal favoritism, political corruption and an inward-looking fraction of the bureaucracy, by the 1990s Turkish business classes emerged on the social scene with two basic demands or reforms. They wished to replace the traditional rent-distributing state with a small but effective bureaucracy, and then also to organize the Turkish state and society around values of global competition (Sklair 2001:136–41). The rise of media-bound politics which transformed business actors into pundits on mass media outlets served this purpose. It became part of a broader public relations campaign which portrayed Turkish capital owners as challengers to a corrupt political system.

The problem is that the Turkish business classes’ experiment with active tools of hegemony has produced larger unintended consequences. First, business classes learned by experience that they can mobilize their class identity to action (Öniş 2005). On an equal ground, as challengers to a corrupt

political system, they have gained visibility in the public eye. Taking the high ground from left-leaning intellectuals and policy-makers, they started shaping public opinion in line with the broader class interests of wealthy groups. In addition, the increasing presence of capital owners in the public sphere has sent an indirect but effective message to the political elite more generally, namely to operate the state in business-friendly ways.

As a result, business classes have expanded their hegemony on economic, ideological and political grounds, drawing the Turkish experience closer to a Gramscian scheme. Consent and civil society backed up by state coercion is emerging as a new axis of class domination. Meanwhile, the coalition of capital extended further, to provincial entrepreneurs whose connections to the world economy through “Islamic networks” guarantee them a seat next to the state-nurtured big bourgeoisie of Istanbul (Buğra 1998, 1994:1–93). Capital owners were not alone in their quest for ideological hegemony in contemporary Turkish society. The predominant position of the propertied groups in the Turkish context coincided with the emergence of a well-educated professional middle class in the last decade.

Urbanization, rising enrollments in higher education and expanding participation of women in the labor market in particular have all contributed to the rise of a new professional-managerial class, whose substantial human capital is their distinctive asset. Unlike its earlier counterparts or, for that matter, the rest of Turkish society, this new generation of professionals has developed strong global attachments – thanks to their technological literacy, cultural resources, language skills and institutional involvement. Furthermore, as occupants of top positions in the labor market, they have become primary movers of consumption patterns, which are also usually organized around global life-styles (Bali 2002:110–81). Feroz Ahmad confirms the burgeoning social structure in the cities, pointing out that “Turkey had become a consumer society, serving about ten percent of the urban population...” (Ahmad 2003:161).

Mostly born during the more individualized context of the 1980s, young professionals equate consumption with social status, thereby augmenting agendas of social change with individual projects of material wealth. Unlike its counterparts during the Cold War era, which that took active roles in working-class politics (Köse and Öncü 2002), the aspirations of the new Turkish educated elite finds strong resonance in a market perspective. Survival of the economically fittest ideology became accepted

as a new social norm, superseding vanguard perspectives and forms of labor market solidarity (Neyzi 2001). Hence, the major goal of the new Turkish middle class is to “to get ahead” in a flexible labor market, which promises less job security in the long run (Keyder 2004).

Viewed from a long term perspective, both class trajectories have converged along the line of business class hegemony. Both lend strong moral approval to the rising consumption ideal which set the stage for a distinct social mode in the Turkish society during the 1990s: an era of conspicuous consumption.

Aesthetics of Consumption: The Mall Decade

The rise of a consumption ideal has a profound effect on Turkish society by breaking a long-held social code in Ottoman-Turkish culture. The display of material wealth, which had been historically discouraged by the state, through threats of expropriation and through social ordering, has been recently reversed. Wedding ceremonies, annual company balls, and night life extravaganza have created a new public space in which the consumption experience of private actors is increasingly on display. Historically speaking, both the Ottoman ruling class and Turkish nationalists had benefited from the ascetic moral code. This had kept their domestic power rivals in check and at the same time had forged social solidarity with general ranks in society (Pamuk 2004:234–235).

Yet, the Ottoman-Turkish social cosmology was disrupted by the rise of market civilization, first at the turn of the twentieth century and now today. In the late Ottoman context, ethnic and religious differences between the political elite and the economic agents, along with community pressure, had prevented economic agents from prevailing (Keyder 1987:49–69; Exertzoglou 2003). But during the 1990s, business classes finally broke the social code successfully, in favor of ostentatious displays of wealth. This now distances them from the rest of society, through their newly acquired *habitus* in fields of art, leisure and culture (Bourdieu 1984).

Echoing earlier observations by Thorstein Veblen on the *nouveau riche*, conspicuous consumption and connoisseurship have become the ultimate markers of social status in Turkish society. The life-styles of urban upper classes – from dining habits to leisure activities, and from house decoration to vacation choices – have become extremely popular. Moreover,

a recent flourishing of commercial television stations, private radio stations and newspaper oligopolies also contribute to social change. The privately owned media has established close ties with the entertainment industry, where fashion models, night life characters, business people, soccer players and “high society” have been transformed into new role-models of Turkish society – based on their “signs” of consumption and media-centered fame.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the local entertainment industry has been accompanied by globally oriented consumption patterns. This finds its concrete expression in thriving cultural industries as well as in a booming demand for import items such as cars, personal care and technology products. Resonating with the recent consumption experience of Israel in the Middle East (Carmeli and Applbaum 2004) and the developing world more generally, the mushrooming of US-style shopping malls, fast-food chains and local branches of global brands have created a large spending pool for global products, particularly in urban spaces (Keyder 1999b:13–6). Indeed, the big cities of Turkey have rapidly transformed into spending sites for every taste and interest, creating worlds of hedonism in a distinctly Third World context.

The multifaceted nature of consumption patterns also allows socially marginalized or economically impoverished groups to follow the tide. From the Islamic middle classes to urban youth in squatter areas, the idea of consumption has steadily penetrated the Turkish mindset, even as economically excluded groups do not possess the financial means to be loyal consumers on a long term basis (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Bauman 2004a:14; Bauman 1998b:36–41).¹ One response has been the use of violence as an expressive category (De Certeau 1998:35). Economically marginalized groups fight their consumption battles on the streets of Turkey, attacking physically high signs of consumerism.² The dramatic diffusion of credit

¹ It is worth mentioning that urban youth (aged 15–24) have been at the center of this frustration. Consisting of eleven percent of the population, the unemployment rate for this group has been over twenty percent from 1988 to 2006.

² Bauman (1998:37) brilliantly identifies the heart of the problem: “In a consumer society, a ‘normal life’ is the life of consumers, preoccupied with making their choices among the panoply of publicly displayed opportunities for pleasurable sensations and lively experiences . . . Poverty means being excluded from whatever passes for a ‘normal life’ . . . [and] this results in resentment and aggravation, which spill out in the form of violent acts . . .” Without doubt, “the most frightening specter is inadequacy.” Bauman (2004b:100). In the past

cards during the 1990s tempered this somewhat, for it accelerated consumption and increased spending across social groups amidst urban riots, physical violence, and increasing polarization in urban spaces (Aksoy and Robins 1994).³

Towards a New Global Orientation

The emergence of a consumer society has coincided with the burgeoning of a new cosmopolitan perspective, particularly among new middle classes and the political elite at the turn of the twenty-first century (Eralp 1993; Dominguez 1996:16). Representing a new way of interacting with the world, the attention of the Turkish public has largely shifted from solely domestic-national issues to globally connected ones. As such, the new export drive in the economy as well as the European Union ideal in politics and the increasing impact of global cultural industries have all become concrete reflections of Turkey's ongoing process of acquiring a new mental map towards global actors and global structures.

The new global framework was set in motion in the economy during the 1980s when protective tariffs were dismantled, the financial sector was liberalized, and exporters received generous rebates from the state. This pitted the interests of globally connected merchants and firms against domestic producers. It also separated the economic claims of finance from those of industry. Replacing a received domestic-orientation with a global strategy, the Turkish economy has also changed. It has become vulnerable to short-term money flows, high interest rates and large trade deficits and, as a result, has experienced skyrocketing debt, devaluations, and two major economic crises (Öniş 1996; Rodrik and Velasco 1999; Ertuğrul and Yeldan 2003).

Economic restructuring and incorporation into the world economy laid the groundwork not only for broader exchange of goods and products. It also introduced to Turkey new social values and cosmopolitan perspectives. Individualistic life-styles and consumer values coupled with global

decade, May Day and New Year Celebrations in Istanbul have at times been marked by "looting and vandalism" downtown, with hotels and shopping centers the main targets.

³) As of December 2004, there were 25.5 million credit cards in use for approximately 70 million citizens in the country.

visions have an increasingly broad appeal in Turkish society.⁴ Likewise, the idea of cut-throat competition, a survival of the fittest mentality, individualism, globally connected social identities and American consumption patterns are part and parcel of today's social formation in Turkey. Guy Standing recently captured the new, prevailing mood: according to this perspective, freedom is associated with "competitive individualism, consumerism, possession, aggrandizement, maximization of short-term profits and individual advantage" (Standing 2002:277).

A globalization in the biographies of professional classes can also be detected in the mobility patterns of Turkish citizens. Urban professional middle classes which are financially insecure and socially unsatisfied in the country are increasingly choosing to work and live abroad. In his discussion of the 2000–2001 economic crisis, Fikret Şenses turns attention to this largely unnoticed issue (2003:108, emphasis added): "How do we measure the socio-economic cost of increased desire for emigration, especially among the younger population – including *recent graduates* – as a result of declining employment opportunities and real wages and salaries?"

Beyond economic and social paths of articulation with global forces, Turkey has also staked her political future on post-national structures. Accordingly, joining the European Union became during the 1990s the ultimate political agenda (Rumford 2003). Having started membership talks recently, the majority of the Turkish political elite now joins hands with globalist middle classes to reform Turkey in every aspect, from the legal sphere to social life. As happened at the turn of the twentieth century, we see today another wave of "Westernization," which seems to be the major axis around which Turkey's future will be determined both at the domestic level and in the international arena (Öniş 2003:26).

Finally, if globalization and the end of the Cold War functioned as the catalyst for Turkey's new global vision, the peculiar nature of Ottoman-Turkish modernization is nonetheless the historical element also moving Turkey into new global frameworks in politics, social life and economics. Having a neither colonial background nor a hegemonic state position

⁴ There is a heated debate about how to interpret the contours of individualization in contemporary societies. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002:7) rightly recognize all perspectives fall between two extremes: autonomy (do-it-your-way biography) on one side and anomie (break-down biography) on the other.

(Pamuk 1987), and wavering across its Muslim, European and Turkic identities which are respectively represented in different time zones (Huntington 1993), Turkey has always been obsessed with how she is being seen or represented abroad. Hence, cosmopolitan outlooks as opposed to local visions preoccupy the Turkish mindset today.

Deficient Citizens

The new class structure and global orientation of the Turkish economy is also generating a distributional crisis domestically. While incomes drawn from interest, rent and profits surpass the share of wages and salaries in an open economy environment, the entrepreneurs connected to global networks through trade as well as through illegal means reap even more spectacular gains (Keyder 1999b:21–23). Furthermore, rent-seeking groups in banking and real estate development enjoy enormous economic rents through government bonds and skyrocketing property values in urban space (Yeldan 2002; Keyder 1999c:173–186).

Despite temporal gains, the majority does not benefit enough from the globalizing economy.⁵ Low-skilled workers, salaried groups, urban youth, the elderly, along with the non-agricultural force in the countryside, find themselves in economic dire straits. The destruction of the national economy and the uneven distribution of globalization rewards means unbearable pensions, low wages, chronic unemployment and declining social support from the state (Table 1; Şenses 2003; Boratav 1990). The conclusion that many authors draw from Latin America holds true equally for Turkey as well: the new economic model which is based on neo-liberal principles prioritizes economic growth over social development and puts international support before national sovereignty (Centeno and Silva 1998:3; Centeno 1997:20; Chase 2002; Smith and Korzeniewicz 1997).

⁵ It should also be noted that income inequality as measured by Gini coefficient followed a stable trend ranging between 0.50 to 0.40 from the 1980s to 2004. While the 1994 and 2000–2001 economic crises pushed inequality up, this was taken back few years later. The same argument can also be made for the income share held by the lowest twenty percent of the population which ranged between 5.3 to 6 percent from 1995 to 2005. See Bhalla (2002, 220) that reports the same trends for Turkey from 1960 to 2000.

Table 1
Turkish labor market (1990–2006)

Years	Unemployed (%)	Workforce participation (%)
1990–1992	8.2	56.5
1993–1995	8.4	53.6
1996–1998	6.8	53.0
1999–2001	7.5	50.8
2002–2004	10.4	48.9
1990–2006	8.5	52.1

Source: State Institute of Statistics.

A second aspect of social inequality is a widening gap between globally connected centers and the rest of the country (Şenesen 2002; Sassen 2000). Istanbul is emerging as the key articulator to global networks, and is offering improved services and opportunities to its wealthy residents. Health and education services in particular are increasingly privatized and cater to the rich in urban contexts. Private hospitals and privately owned educational institutions have mushroomed in the last decade. During 1999–2000 Istanbul hosted the majority of the approximately quarter million Turkish students who attend private schools at the pre-college level (Gök 2002:98) and fifty percent of all private hospitals in Turkey are located in the city.

In contrast to dramatic improvements in metropolitan areas, the rest of the country experiences unpromising economic conditions due to a collapse of the developmentalist agenda. The dismantling of once generous subsidies to Turkish agriculture and resulted in the growing indebtedness of peasants (Aydın 1993). The “pauperization” of small producers accelerated after the installment of International Monetary Fund packages (Oyan 2002). Approached from a broader perspective, these and other developments reveal a two-level social polarization. While the distributional gap between globally connected entrepreneurs and the rest highlights class polarization in urban contexts, the rising disparity between globally connected centers and other regions marks spatial inequalities.

In response to volatile economic conditions and growing access to information in the economy, the lower classes and the urban poor of Turkey have developed two major strategies to fight poverty and social exclusion. Here they share the experience of Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s (Latapi and De la Rocha 2002).

First, in a labor market characterized by rigidity and undeveloped social protection schemes,⁶ the economically marginalized are forced to mobilize all human resources at the household level for economic survival. They also resort to larger social units, including extended families, neighbors and religious institutions, for community support (Şenses 1996; White 2004; Tuğal 2002:95; Goodin 2000).

Second, a relatively small minority seeks alternative paths of social mobility by joining informal networks, such as neighborhood gangs and mafia-type organizations. Contemporaneous with the post-Soviet experience of the 1990s, the growing prestige of mafia on media and its increasing presence in the Turkish business world, as a racketeer and problem solving social institution, guarantees a reserve army of labor organized along the lines of localism, ethnicity or other informal networks. A more widespread but ineffective option is simply to adopt market-friendly shortcut strategies, such as commercial gambling, which exploded during the last decade.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion above presents a snapshot of the recent great transformation of Turkey from a political economy perspective. We have seen that market and global networks are increasingly reconstituting the Turkish society at multiple levels. The rise of new middle classes as well as capital owners' quest for hegemony not only guarantee a victory of market forces. They also galvanized an unprecedented wave of conspicuous consumption and then also prioritized global agendas over local perspectives and sustained long-term inequalities in the country. Furthermore, the market perspective is largely assisted by the new global framework, which in turn

⁶ At the turn of the 21st century, one half of the Turkish workforce is working "off the books," is with no ties to official social security schemes.

suggests that regulations, worldview and the structures of the nation-state alone fail to explain the contemporary situation in Turkey.

Despite its short-term success, sustaining market hegemony and endorsing globalization in Turkey might be a difficult task to achieve. The biggest challenge will come from the precarious popular classes (Amin 2003). Their persistent economic impoverishment in urban centers can translate into a cultural rights agenda, one built upon informal social networks and embodying ethnic and religious solutions to problems of economic inequality (Touraine 2001; Güllalp 2001; Davis 2004). Furthermore, the ongoing massive migration wave to the cities will only fortify the ranks of the economically desperate new urbanites. The European Union and international lending agencies have already started pressuring Turkey to “downsize” her highly subsidized and large agrarian base.⁷

On a different note, the economic troubles of the educated strata in the cities can equally damage the global and market-oriented perspective of the new middle classes, on both material and ideological grounds.⁸ Low chances of employment and lack of upward mobility in the labor market can lead first to a decline in consumption patterns and then, second, bolster a critique of the modernization project. The historical record of the modern Middle East clearly suggests this possibility (Turner 2003). In other words, persistent inequalities can become both the social outcome and “gravedigger” of neo-liberal globalization in Turkey.

One way to avoid this scenario is for Turkey to negotiate a better deal between economy and society and also to strike a new balance between the local and the present global. Economic rights will be the key to achieving greater equality and to promoting social integration in Turkey by re-

⁷) There are two striking trends in contemporary Turkish demography. First, Istanbul continues to receive large waves of immigrants. By 2000, the net inflow was more than four hundred thousand people annually. Second, the economic divide between western Turkey and the rest of the country is clearly reflected in migration patterns, which are westward. While Aegean and Marmara are on the receiving end, central, eastern and southeastern Anatolia along with Black Sea region have been sending residents to urban centers of the west.

⁸) Notice the changing nature of Turkish labor market from 1988 to 2006. The share of graduates of high school and above jumped from a mere 15 percent to 34 percent as of 2006. Yet, the well-educated section of the Turkish labor force is still struggling with unemployment rates comparable to or higher than the national average. It is still seeking better career opportunities in a flexible market environment.

embedding the economy into society. This prospect has become more critical recently as the Islamic-rooted party (AKP), which came to power in 2002 after the worst economic crisis in Turkish history, delivered economic growth through ruthless globalization.

Despite market discourse which attaches all virtues to global economy and all evils to the rest, the controversy is not about integration versus isolation. The basic issue at stake is whether Turkey will embrace the free-market ethos with its all-disruptive consequences or instead become more tuned to a distributive justice scenario which transforms global riches into public goods. Hence, one of the fundamental questions facing contemporary Turkey is the extent to which wealth, information and technology will be diffused and become accessible across social groups and different regions within its borders. If the Turkish Republic is at a junction point, as most current analysts claim, there is no doubt that this aspect also deserves attention as one possible pathway for the future.

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