Journal of American Studies of Turkey
10 (1999) : 81-89.

"Communicating America," Validating Turkey

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The topic of this year's seminar—"Communicating America: Media, Culture and Nation in the Age of Information" (Cappadocia, October 1999)—aimed to focus on Americanization, its relationship to globalization, and what the implications of this might be for the future of American Studies in Turkey. The plenary speaker, Richard J. Pells (University of Texas at Austin), had already published widely on the subject; in a 1993 article, he contended that "nationalism has continued to flourish in Europe, in spite of the American intrusion, and cultural idiosyncrasies remain indigenous to each country regardless of transmissions from abroad" ("American Culture Abroad: The European Experience since 1945" 82). In another article published four years later, he suggested that "Europeans have adapted American popular culture to their own needs, tastes and traditions" ("The Local and Global Loyalties of Europeans and Americans" B5).

What was evident from many papers presented at the seminar was that such statements assume both positive and negative connotations in the Turkish context. On the one hand, the introduction of American culture has been accommodated into the Turkish project of modernity, which has attempted to forge a modern nation-state along western lines. On the other hand, the recent fragmentation of cultural identity has prompted people to question the ethics of the nation-state itself. There has been considerable debate on the future of Turkish cultures—especially the national culture—in an increasingly globalized and/or Americanized world (the terms were often used interchangeably in the seminar).

At first, however, it seemed as if this seminar would follow a pattern similar to that of many previous seminars, with both Turkish and non-Turkish speakers offering accounts of the emergence of numerous forms of cultural expression in the public sphere. Many of these originated in America, and subsequently spread worldwide, creating almost limitless possibilities for the re-negotiation of identity, whether at the personal or national levels. This apparently vindicates Pells's observation that most Europeans (including, in this case, the majority of the seminar participants) had successfully adapted elements of American culture to their own needs, tastes and traditions.

In her paper "Mediated Voices: From Private Experience to Social Policy," Donna Wyckoff (Başkent University) used individual case-histories (or herstories) to demonstrate how new collective identities could be forged, particularly if

individuals were prepared to become “claim-makers” or “consciousness-rousers” by appearing on television, writing for the newspapers, or establishing pressure-groups. This could provide a variety of opportunities for resistance. Wyckoff drew attention to the way in which American culture can serve as a proving ground for democracy by offering new conceptions of identity; in other words, that practices of choice and personal autonomy are permitted, enabling individuals to work towards new freedoms at both the social and political levels.

Victoria Amador (Hacettepe University) made similar claims in her analysis of “Positive Gay/Lesbian Images in the 1990s American Cinema.” She began by focusing on how gay and lesbian identities had been represented both in mainstream Hollywood movies and in independent productions since the beginning of the twentieth century. By tradition, Hollywood had been rather wary of such material: one only has to recall how the part of Stanley Kowalski had to be rewritten for the film version of Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). Even today, most major Hollywood studios tend to treat gay and lesbian issues in a superficial manner—for example, by including a celibate gay man (played by Rupert Everett) as Julia Roberts’s confidante in the heterosexual romantic comedy *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997). Amador subsequently looked at recent independent productions—both American and non-American—which attempted to deconstruct stereotypical images of gay and lesbian identity. The fact that some of these films—e.g. Stephen Frears’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)—proved successful at the American box-office demonstrated that resistance to the Hollywood hegemony is not only possible but inevitable.

Aslıhan Tokgöz (Doğuş University) presented a clumsily titled paper, “Robert Coover’s Employment of Filmic Devices as a ‘Projection’ of the Contemporary American Situation,” which attempted to demonstrate how resistance was central to the notion of “postmodern” America, in which old ways of life had been dissolved and new ones set in place. This was especially apparent in the novelist Robert Coover’s use of cinematic techniques—frequent shifts between past and present, abrupt changes of scene. Tokgöz further suggested that this was something to be celebrated, not mourned: by ignoring conventions such as the linear narrative, or the omniscient narrator (which were characteristic of “mainstream” American novels), Coover had enabled individual readers to draw their own conclusions as to what exactly was meant by “the contemporary American situation.”

Other papers sought to determine the extent to which this spirit of resistance had penetrated the lives of young people in Turkey. Using responses to a questionnaire as a basis for research, Jeffrey Howlett’s analysis of “Peep Show TV: America, Voyeurism and Consumerism on the Turkish Airwaves” revealed that the majority of his first-year students in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Başkent University wore Levis or Lee Cooper jeans, watched American films, and listened to American music. But they did not consider themselves Americanized; on the contrary, they viewed such products as a way of asserting their independence

from restrictive local traditions and practices. This also provided them with a reason for wanting to study American culture at university. Gönül Pultar has expressed this view succinctly in a recent article:

> American studies signifies for me the possibility of "doing new things" in a manner that is not possible in other disciplines. American studies is an area in which new things are happening, generating new methodologies that eventually find their way into other disciplines. This freedom is the main characteristic and attraction of American studies for me, besides its capacity of imparting a sense of freedom and democracy through the study of American institutions. (11)

This notion of resistance (which is similar to that expressed by Wyckoff in the American context) derives from the belief that the experience of American mass culture in Turkey can offer new opportunities for freedom of expression to otherwise marginalized individuals.

Other speakers' views of resistance appeared to be inspired by more traditional conceptions of modernity. In her survey of "Historical Fiction as a Means of Communicating Political Ideas," Seçkin Ergin (Ege University) emphatically stated that students could best understand American politics through the study of "fully drawn characters" participating in "real life situations" in novels such as E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1974). The argument here is a familiar liberal humanist one, recently rehearsed by Frank Kermode, who contends that literary texts should be considered "great, not because we attribute superhuman powers to the author, but because they are performances exhibiting degrees of skill and power we are able to judge, because we can compare them with other works that we agree are worth the most concentrated attention we can give them" (8). Through a rigorous study of such "performances," Turkish students can acquire, as one other Turkish academic, Emel Doğramacı, put it elsewhere, the kind of insight into a foreign country which renders them "much more open to the world—it enriches their life and their experiences of life" (Doğramacı 15). Ergin's paper clearly suggested that, by resisting mass culture—films, music or fashion—in favor of high culture, any student of American culture could develop his or her educational capabilities, something that would prove beneficial to the nation as a whole.

Despite their almost diametrically opposing views of modernity, both Howlett and Ergin described how the introduction and dissemination of western cultural products could contribute to the creation of new Turkish identities. In other words, they identified Americanization with modernization. Howlett offered a "bottom up" view, in which students challenge restrictive local traditions through consumer choice and personal autonomy. Ergin, on the other hand, advocated a "top-down" approach: by pursuing a four-year program of American Culture and Literature (Note 1) in university, students appreciate that such traditions are not restrictive at

all, but provide ample scope for personal and (more significantly) national development.

In considering what Americanization means in the Turkish context, it is important to clarify the relationship between "modernity" and "modernization." Modernity is closely associated with a certain type of cultural experience—the Enlightenment, rationality, scientific method, western values (including Americanization). It is also associated with a certain type of politics—democracy, citizenship, the nation-state—which are characteristic of the late twentieth century. Modernization, on the other hand, refers to the set of socio-economic processes that constitute the dynamics of modernity—capitalism, educational and technological development. By taking American Studies courses, or watching American films, students become aware of the liberating potential of modernization, which may subsequently encourage them to participate in the task of creating "a modern civilization for Turkey" (Haberal 259).

Earlier on in this report, I referred to the fact that many speakers made little or no distinction between "globalization" and "Americanization" in this seminar. This did not appear problematic, so long as they confined themselves to the cultural sphere. Both terms were linked to modernity, which in turn was associated with notions of progress and national development. If Americanization and globalization are viewed from an economic perspective, however, a very different picture emerges. The "sense of freedom and democracy," so valued by Pultar can only be acquired if all government-inspired trade restrictions or subsidies are removed, permitting the unrestrained free movement of goods. In this sense "freedom" is related to a securing of financial advantage and the consequent destruction of one's competitors: the new freer market emphatically does not result in an increase in one's competitor's business as well. Fredric Jameson outlines the potential consequences: "Success in this area would at once mean the tendential extinction of new national and cultural artistic production . . . just as the free movement of American movies in the world spells the death knell of national cinemas elsewhere, perhaps of all other national cinemas as distinct species" (61). To adapt the title of the seminar, in their enthusiasm for "Communicating America" to the rest of the world, American transnational corporations may pose a threat to the development of other "media, culture(s) and nation(s)," including those of Turkey.

Edibe Sözen (İstanbul University) addressed this issue in her paper "The 'Large-size' Image in the Americanization Process" which suggested that the indigenous national culture was threatened both materially and socially by Americanization—material on account of the enormous financial interests involved, and social because of the potentially radical shift in values. She contended that both the Turkish media and its audiences were in thrall to "large-size images," such as "the American Dream"—as evidenced, for example, in ways in which American films, television and music had been allowed to dominate the market. Whether they knew it or not, those students who had purchased Levis or Lee Cooper jeans were the

willing victims of the Americanization process. To restore what she perceived as "freedom of choice," she advocated the imposition of substantial import tariffs, and a rejection by consumers of western-manufactured goods in favor of local alternatives.

Sözen's argument could be faulted on two counts. First, she failed to understand how consumers (which, in this sense, includes those who are studying or teaching American Studies, as well as any other "country studies" subject, such as English Literature) can utilize foreign cultural products to create conceptual and material alternatives to the process of capitalist globalization. Some of these were described in Ergin's paper, which demonstrated how the close analysis of American literary texts might help to develop inter- or cross-cultural competence. In commercial culture, Turkey's industries endeavor to produce hybrid products—jeans, popular music or films—to compete at the local level with western corporations. Consumers such as Howlett's Başkent students become producers themselves, utilizing these cultural products (as well as those from the west) both for their own ends, and for the benefit of the nation.

More significantly, Sözen suggested that the Turkish project of modernity represented nothing more than a subjection to western values—something which is clearly *not* the case in a republic founded on Kemalist principles. Many seminar participants forcefully expressed their objections, pointing out (for instance) how Atatürk's cultural policy had been based not on the notion of imitation, but on the creative adaptation of western models. This was clearly evident, for instance, in the way in which the Ministry of Education commissioned translations of foreign (mostly European and American) classics, to bring them to the attention of the reading public, and to demonstrate the effectiveness of Atatürk's Turkish language reforms.

Such reactions revealed how concerned many of the seminar participants were for the potential effect of globalization and/or Americanization on the future progress of Turkey. Nor is this simply a matter of goods, machinery and buildings: the media also shows great ingenuity in transmitting a series of cultural values which are assumed to be of relevance to all peoples in the world. Examples of this may include human rights and parliamentary democracy (both of which are guaranteed by the US president fulfilling his appointed role as the world's most powerful politician), and the promotion of English as a global language of communication. These points were well illustrated by Leo Mahoney (Başkent University) in his analysis of the way in which the earthquakes in north-eastern Turkey of August and November 1999 had been represented in the American media, which revealed more about contemporary American values than it did about the Turkish victims. Here, for instance, is a description of the disaster wrought by the first earthquake: "The dead lie in morgues and meat lockers and cold storage warehouses. They lie in hastily dug graves dusted white with lime, and in body bags laid out on the misting ice of a brand-new skating rink ("Turks Recover From Earthquake Crisis" 3).

Obviously, according to the American daily the Turkish authorities could not cope; it was up to the Americans to offer material and spiritual help: “search-and-rescue experts from Fairfax County headed to Turkey yesterday—[while] President Clinton offered thoughts and prayers to the Turkish people.” (“Life after the Quake” 12). Three months later, a writer from the same newspaper described what life was like in Düzce near Bolu immediately after the second earthquake. Note that the two protagonists converse with one another in English, rather than their native language:

> Mehmet İlkay gently stroked his wife’s matted brown hair and removed a gold chain from her neck. Handing it to his father, who stood above him, İlkay said, “I’d like some water, please.” Then, slowly and silently, he began to weep. (“Turkey’s Shaken Lives: Bitter Lessons Learned in Last Quake Recalled As Death Toll Rises To 362” 25)

How should people in Turkey respond to globalization and/or Americanization? Although the topic was not directly discussed at this seminar, it emerged from many of the papers that one proposed solution might be to treat America as “less of a physical place than an evolving idea, an ever changing matrix of cultural beliefs and practices that arose within the borders of the United States, but which also is filtered through other cultures in the process vulgarly called ‘Americanization,’ but what might be called*vertrossing*, an untranslatable Dutch word conveying the idea of mediation or creolization.” This approach, proposed by a professor at George Washington University, Bernard Mergen, suggests that American Studies should enable non-Americans to reflect on their own cultures, which may subsequently encourage them to establish “South African, Mongolian and Kazakh Studies” for instance. The emergence of new forms of “country studies,” or “area studies” as they are called, can not only promote dialog between people all over the world, but also demonstrates the value of American Studies as a subject that accommodates different and often contradictory points of view: “The true Americanness of American studies is that it has become a way for people to understand their own cultures” (Mergen 7). In spite of his efforts to distance American Studies from the “vulgar” process of Americanization, the writer’s stance is very similar to that adopted by the American media—that exist certain local values which are automatically assumed to be of global interest. These values have been summarized thus:

> The new American studies has [located] a set of underlying but permanently open national facts around which all identities are shaped and with which the many rhetorics of our culture are engaged. Among

> these permanently open, that is, never won or lost, national facts are democratic culture and its demands; the culture of freedom that permits conditions of dominance, whether economic, sexual or cultural, and has permitted even permutations of slavery as the one aspect of the nature of freedom itself; the creation of a national life that is economic rather than religious, or in the anthropological sense, cultural. This troubled utopian core of enterprise, freedom and democratic culture baffled by the preexisting social facts while never surrendering to them is essential. (Fisher xiv)

From this perspective, it is likely that globalization and Americanization can be equated with unification and standardization. Through the gradual spread of American values, either through the media, or transnational corporations, or through American Studies, a standard set of values is transmitted to other cultures.

How other cultures respond to such values, however, is perhaps more interesting. A recent book published in the US, *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (1997), exhibits a general suspicion of the processes that are generally considered to comprise globalization. Identities are called into question by the dissolving boundaries of nation-states consequent on the trans-nationalization of economic and cultural life. By associating globalization with Americanization, the majority of the participants at the Cappadocia seminar reaffirmed the values of the nation-state, and the modernizing policy which lies at the heart of the Kemalist project. Globalization is actually a form of Americanization; and Americanization, if treated creatively, promotes educational and technological development. In a recent essay, Ernest Wolf-Gazo has shown how this spirit encouraged the American educational reformer John Dewey to produce his "Report on Turkish Education," based on a visit to Turkey in 1924. Dewey evidently

> saw an analogy between the great social experiment in America, especially its experience of the Old West, and Anatolia. All the categories applied to the old American West, such as community, willpower, toughness, risk taking and purpose, could certainly be applied to the new Turkey. Dewey saw Atatürk and his republican followers as the frontiersmen and women of a newly established land, possessing a vision clearly focused on the future, not on the past. In Ankara he felt the pulse of a pioneer spirit, with strong courage and willpower, despite the heat, dust and malaria. (16)

This paragraph expresses the rationale of the Kemalist experiment: American models are not to be slavishly imitated, but should rather provide a basis for innovative educational policies that benefit the Turkish nation as a whole.

This report has been entitled "'Communicating America': Validating Turkey." As with previous seminars, there was a wide cross-section of papers, focusing both on American culture and its representations in contemporary Turkey. What was most striking, however, was the way in which the material presented in these papers provided the stimulus for a wide-ranging discussion on the future of the Turkish nation, and the modernist project which has sustained it for the past eight decades. This not only focused on the value of modernity in a globalized world (provoked, no doubt, by the realization that "if modernity is to be emancipatory, it has to contemplate on its negation before ignoring and condemning it" (Özdoğan 159); but also considered what was meant by the term "modernity" at the very end of the twentieth century. One thing was clear—the distinctions between the economic and cultural spheres, both in America and (more importantly for the seminar) in Turkey had become increasingly blurred. Students of American Studies are encouraged by their teachers to think for themselves, and to establish new identities; and they are also consumers, who have the right to formulate their own lifestyles from a range of western and locally manufactured goods. Given this background, perhaps the time has come, as Günay Göksu Özdoğan has suggested in a recent article, for Turkey to forge "a new stage of consensus through mutual recognition of different cultures, plural political positions, multiple identities, and liberalization of political and social spheres" (159). Some of the participants might disagree with this view; but what was overwhelmingly evident, from the range of material presented, and the participants' reactions to it, was that this process of liberalization has already begun.

Notes

1 That is how American Studies departments are named in Turkey. Editor's note.

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