Chapter 12

Turkey’s Experience of Modern Consumer Culture

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the issue of consumption from a sociological perspective and focuses primarily on the emergence of consumer society in Turkey by making use of the historical data in the literature as well as of arguments of some prominent thinkers on the subject, such as Baudrillard, Simmel, and Veblen. Following this general point of view, the author goes further, delving into the significant points of modern consumer culture in Turkey. To this aim, the rise of consumer culture in the country and the unique role of mass media and of the places of consumption in the spreading of this new lifestyle are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Consumption is one of the basic needs of humanity and is regarded as an indispensable element of life. Regardless of time and location, individuals have always engaged in consumption in the course of all stages of their lives. A new-born baby as well as an adult lives to consume; low-wage families as well as members of high-society are conditioned to consume; our ancestors having lived in very different physical and socio-economic environments had to consume and our descendants will continue to consume.

Being such a common behavior to all eras and places, consumption is frequently highlighted in most disciplines, especially in the social sciences. Economics, management, sociology, psychology are examples of such areas that contain a rich literature on consumption. The studies address the issue from different perspectives, ranging from the psychological motivation behind consumer behavior to changing trends in free time activities.

This chapter addresses the issue of consumption from a sociological perspective, focusing on the socio-economic changes that Turkey has undergone since 1980. The paper consists of four main parts, the first addresses the general marks of consumer society and culture in Turkey. The second is about the evolution of consumer culture in the country. This part includes the core reasons behind the country’s adopting consumer culture, and the importance of the period after 1980 in this transformation. Next, the

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chapter explores the impact of mass media on individuals’ consuming habits in Turkey, and the fourth and last part examines the influence of shopping places on the rise of consumer culture in Turkey. Through these four main parts, the main objectives of the chapter are 1) presenting a broad idea of the rise of modern consumer culture, 2) highlighting the issue of consumer culture from a sociological point of view, 3) emphasizing the historical background of modern consumerism, and examining the influence of communication tools, and 4) examining shopping centers in Turkey – put under the spotlight in detail.

BACKGROUND

Turkey’s journey into the world of modern consumption has been an issue of interest for researchers from various disciplines. Sociology is a major study area among those in which the issue of consumption in Turkey is a recurrent concern, being addressed in several studies from different standpoints. As an example, Orçan’s study (2014) handles the issue as a long timeline and examines Turkish consumer culture experience from Ottoman period to the 21st century. Additionally, Sandıkçı and Ger published several works focusing on the birth and development of consumer society in Turkey. In one of their papers, the researchers studied the consumptionscape of Turkey in general (2002) and in another one, they grouped Turkish consumer practices in four main categories as Islamist, spectacularist, nationalist, and historical (2005). In addition to these studies, Başfırıncı (2011) and Zorlu (2003) focus on the emergence and development of modern consumer habits in Turkish society in their research and highlight the importance of the years starting with 1980 in this social transformation.

Consumer Culture in Turkish Society

The notion of consumption has evolved into a culture. Societies adopting this culture have been addressed as consumer societies. This highly effective system acts as one of the vital components of capitalism since it provides the consumption levels needed to drive needed production. Despite the emphasis solely on production in the beginning years of industrialization, the subsequent years experienced a shift in emphasis towards consumption. Moreover, the importance of free time apart from labour time became an issue of concern.

The rise of the importance of consumption has affected almost every nation, aided by the help of communication tools and globalization. Although differences exist, a pervasiveness of a consumer focus has evolved – the rise of the so-called modern life of individuals. Modernism has assumed a common experience among most societies, although it is manifested differently depending on each country’s own circumstances. Turkey is a nation that has met modernization via a nonwestern orientation and has adopted the system over time. From the very beginning of the Republic, laws were enacted with the purpose of determining and quickening modernization, serving the aim of cultural change and institutionalizing social reconciliations with Western countries (Gencer, 2008). Modern values that are idealized and determined to be goals to be achieved have entered into Turkish culture via consumer culture. The adoption of consumer culture values meant another step in the way of modernization for Turkish people. Despite the tendency to define consumption as an immoral cultural crime in Ottoman novels (Mardin, 1992), consumption depicts a dramatic change that has accompanied the path of modernization.