

# Culture & Society

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## In Old Pera, New Challenges for Turkey

Paul Skoczylas

All of the puzzles and problems of modern-day Turkey can be found in Taksim, the contemporary heir to the ancient Byzantine city of Pera that connected Europe with Asia. Here, ornate, European-style buildings housing western stores, restaurants, nightclubs, and wine houses coexist with Muslim family restaurants, newly-renovated mosques, and men working out of sheds. As middle class families stroll along the main thoroughfare, wearing the latest fashions and chatting about the newest American and European films, villagers hawk cheap Asian textiles in the side alleys, Kurdish teenage boys sell stuffed mussels from large trays they carry on their backs, and gypsy children beg for money.

The puzzles of modernity that confront the developing world are played out vividly in Taksim. Here, one can see the vision of a modern secular Turkey, outlined by the country's founder, Kemal Atatürk, competing with the Islamist desire to regain Turkey's prominence as a leader of the Islamic world. This competition plays out amidst a larger economic and political crisis that continues to plague the country. The success of the political system in providing a stable environment where Turks feel hope for the future may well determine the character of modern Turkey in the years to come.

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IN OLD PERA, NEW CHALLENGES FOR TURKEY

## The puzzles of modernity that confront the developing world are played out vividly in Taksim.

**A Quarter on the Vanguard.** In Ottoman times, Taksim (then known as Pera) was a walled city across the Golden Horn—a shallow inlet of the Bosphorus—from the Sublime Port and Topkap Palace, the administrative and political seat of the Ottoman Empire. Formerly a trading outpost for Europeans in the Byzantine era, Pera rose to prominence as a hub of commerce during the late Ottoman Empire as successive sultans granted trading privileges to European powers. Pera also served as a center for religious minorities who acted as a conduit between the Ottoman Empire and European traders. As trade became more important, these religious groups became wealthier and developed close ties with their European co-religionists. They were the vanguard of the Europeanization of the Ottoman Empire, a process that embraced Christians, Jews, and Turks in the ruling elite, but left behind the village Turks and Arabs who constituted the majority of the empire.

The renaissance of Taksim during the last century parallels the emergence of the Turkish nation-state. Turkish nationalism arose as a political movement in opposition to outside powers. At the end of World War I, which the Ottoman Empire entered on the Axis side, the Turks found their empire divided up among European powers, with only a rump state left for ethnic Turks. Atatürk drove out the European powers and secured the country's present-day borders as a homeland for Turks in the Turkish War of Independen-

dence. Although never implemented, the dismemberment of Turkey proposed by the Treaty of Sevres infused Turkish national identity with a suspicion that foreign powers sought to dismember Turkey piece by piece. Known as the "Sevres Syndrome," this fear colors Turkish politics even today. Religious minorities, with their close historic ties to Europe, were viewed as agents of foreign powers. Indeed, underscoring this perception was the fact that many Ottoman minorities openly supported the European occupation.

The experience of having to expel foreign powers to secure a homeland provided a basis for citizenship in the emerging Turkish Republic. In yet another chapter of the ugly book of twentieth century nationalism, the concept of Turkish citizenship was narrowly defined, leaving out religious and ethnic minorities. Turkey and Greece, each committed to a religious concept of ethnic nationalism, agreed to an exchange of populations whereby Muslims in Greece were forced to go to Turkey and Christians in Turkey were expelled to Greece. Nearly 1.5 million people were dislocated from places their families had called home for centuries. Although there were exceptions to this rule, such as those accommodating Christians in Istanbul, riots destroying minority-owned businesses and homes throughout Turkey in 1955 convinced most minorities to leave. Of the few who remained, many were banished by Turkish prime minister Ismet Inonu in 1964 on twenty-four

hours notice, forcing them to abandon their homes and all their possessions.

A walk through Taksim provides the informed visitor with an eerie reminder of this legacy. The main street, a pedestrian walkway named Istiklal Cadessi, is lined with churches that are largely empty. Locals do not seem to question why there are so many churches in an area with so few Christians. Perhaps in a country filled with relics of the past, these churches seem no different than the Greek and Roman temples found along the Aegean Sea.

Despite crumbling facades and fading paint, one can still discern buildings designed to meet European tastes: art nouveaux, baroque, and Roman revival styles are all prominent. Although largely forgotten and neglected, these buildings nonetheless house the spirit of old Pera, a spirit rekindled by the industriousness of a new class of rural immigrants. A century ago, it would have been these villagers that would have been considered foreigners in their own capital city. Turks, Kurds, Laz, and people from the Hatay (a former Arab province) come to Istanbul from villages around Anatolia—Turkey's Asiatic wing, spanning from the Aegean on the west to the Iraq-Iran border on the east. They work long days, sending money back to their villages, trying to provide for their families, and hoping to make their fortune in what is known back in Anatolia as the "City of Gold."

You can find these men and women in the back streets of Taksim selling snacks, servicing cigarette lighters, shining shoes, sharpening knives, and transporting goods and people in large man-powered carts. More fortunate vendors occupy small spaces on the first floor of *hans*. These multistory buildings once accommodated both the warehouses and ornate

residences of European traders, and they continue to lead two lives today. While the ground-floor warehouse areas have been transformed into small workspaces for tailors, leatherworkers, newsstands, and dry goods stores, the upper floors of many *hans* have been prized by entrepreneurs who have converted them into some of Taksim's best night spots. *Hans* reveal the brilliant contrast found throughout Taksim. While the Turkish middle class dances the night away in trendy restaurants and clubs, the lower classes work literally beneath their feet.

The Turkish middle class—the keepers of Atatürk's secular tradition—consists of professionals, small businessmen, and industry owners, who have built an impressive and lively infrastructure. Istanbul alone has over eighty Rotary Clubs and numerous business and industry associations. A vibrant, if sometimes over-the-top, media keeps Turkish professionals informed. The children of the middle class often attend schools like Taksim's *Galatasaray Lise*, the renowned French language high school, or Robert College, founded by Americans. Taksim abounds with foreign-language schools, and most middle class children can converse in at least one foreign language. Although English is the most popular language, German is gaining in popularity as ties between Turkey and Germany and between Turkey and the European Union strengthen.

Turkey is also home to a growing number of western stores. However, once viewed as a sign of modernization, these expensive stores are increasingly viewed with a degree of contempt. With the stores' high prices, and the Turkish currency in steady decline, fewer and fewer Turks, even those in the upper-middle class, are able to frequent these stores. It is

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especially unsettling when these stores sell expensive items that are "Made in Turkey." The only way most Turks can afford labels like Benetton, French Connection, and H&M is by buying imitations for a few dollars per item from vendors that line the side streets—evidence also of the informal business that helps sustain Turkish textile workers.

So who keeps these stores in business? The answer lies at the heart of the dilemma encountered by the liberalization of many developing economies. As Turkey opens its economy, its weak political, judicial, and economic structures help foster crony capitalism. Politicians routinely ensure that they and their political allies gain from the privatization of state companies and industries. As a result of this incomplete economic liberalization, many Turks have become extraordinarily wealthy through illegal means. It is

Consequently, members of the traditional middle class who support the Kemalist project have been increasingly marginalized. The professional classes pay taxes, confront extremely volatile inflation rates (68 percent in 2001), rising unemployment, and decreasing real wages, and watch helplessly the growth of the crony capitalist class and the expensive service sector that caters to them.

**The Continuing Crisis.** Thomas Friedman's book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* describes domestic institutions as analogous to an operating system on a computer. To successfully "plug into the global system," a country needs to have a good operating system. As Turkey plugs into the global system, its weak domestic structures marginalize those who follow the rules, and leave behind the hard-working migrants who peddle goods on

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these Turks who buy Mercedes-Benzes, shop in expensive stores, and push prime real estate in Istanbul to prices that compete with San Francisco's. Unlike the professional middle class, these elites are not progressive. They do not invest in education for their children, speak foreign languages, or support integration with Europe. They realize that integration would require establishing the rule of law, which would hamper their ability to exploit the system. The Kemalist project of secularism and modernism means little to them.

the streets in a struggle to make ends meet. Without strong institutions to promote capitalism, ensure fair growth, and enforce uniform rules, a corrupt Russian-style economy may result with dire political consequences.

Despite three IMF bailouts in the past two years, no amount of foreign aid seems enough for Turkey to overcome its economic woes. The money buys only time without driving reform, in effect subsidizing a corrupt and inefficient system. Under current conditions, the poor will remain poor, the middle class will

decline in influence, and a mafia-style elite will increase in wealth and power.

For things to change, Turkey's immature democracy will have to undergo serious reforms. The political culture of Turkish democracy has to catch up with its institutional trappings. Currently, political parties resemble cults of personality, where the leaders cannot be questioned, much less replaced. They serve neither the country nor the people, but their own interests. Though mandatory voter turnout keeps numbers up at the polls, voters do not have much faith that they can build a better future by demanding more of their leaders.

The desperation many Turks face has been demonstrated by an increase in the popularity of fringe political parties—the Islamist Welfare Party received 21 percent of the vote in the 1995 general elections, while the nationalist National Action Party received 18 percent in 1999. The

message is clear: if the government cannot secure conditions for working people to make a good wage, and if moderate officials continue to remain dishonest and inept, the people will turn to more radical means.

As Turkey takes on these challenges, the results will manifest themselves in Taksim. If corruption continues and the economy cannot stabilize, an unbridgeable gap will emerge between the poor who work diligently on the lower floors of the *hans* and the rich who dance above their heads. The pleasures of Taksim will be enjoyed by a few, while the many will look on without hope for a better future. Politically, this frustration could fuel further gains among the nationalists and the Islamists, and extreme measures to gain some semblance of rule of law and justice could result. Those concerned with the fate of Turkey look to Taksim apprehensively for signs of change.

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# Reflections on the Eroding Diversity of a Globalized Food Supply

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K. Dun Gifford

Humans have always pushed to their horizons, and over the eons they have become this planet's only global species. In the last hundred years, the character of globalization has changed dramatically, and the expansionary process that was once driven by tribes, peoples, or nations now belongs to multinational corporations. Because food and drink are essential for living, and all humans have an elemental, innate drive for them, food and drink is a useful eyepiece through which to examine the implications of globalization.

**Getting to Global.** Archaeologists and anthropologists often trace human migration routes with reference to trade in foods. In ancient times, traders traveled back and forth on the spice routes across Asia, and with amphorae full of wine and olive oil around the Mediterranean Basin. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European monarchs spent royal fortunes to send fleets across uncharted oceans in search of treasure and spices.

Through centuries of trade, food such as coffee, tea, chocolate, salt, sugar, and cod were carried over well-traveled land and water routes and became important global commodities. These and other "strange and exotic" foods traveled widely, were welcomed by different cultures, and were gradually assimilated into the cuisines of the importing societies.

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE ERODING DIVERSITY OF A GLOBALIZED FOOD SUPPLY

Christopher Columbus's voyages of discovery compressed many of the elements of this creeping globalization of food into a single event—what is commonly called the Columbian Exchange. In 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing was the impetus for extensive examinations of its consequences. *Newsweek*, for example, published a special Columbus edition in which it concluded, "Columbus's voyages changed the ethnic composition of two continents, revolutionized the world's diet and altered the global environment. His legacy is the Columbian Exchange: the crucial intermingling of peoples, animals, plants, and diseases between Europe, Africa and the Americas."<sup>1</sup>

Through the Columbian Exchange, corn, tomatoes, and potatoes traveled from the New World to the old, while wheat, cattle, and apples traveled from the Old World to the new. These foods, unknown when they arrived in their new homes, became traditional staples; they were *acculturated* into the local cuisines. Steak is now quintessentially American, though cattle are native to Asia; spaghetti with tomato sauce is now quintessentially Italian, though tomatoes are native to South America.

Today, this trend continues. People all over the world consume Australian and Californian wines, Evian and Perrier water pumped from wells in France, New Zealand lamb, and fresh Chilean raspberries. Grapes are flown to winter tables all over the Northern Hemisphere, and frozen American beef and chicken are shipped everywhere.

Perhaps the most apparent aspect of the globalized food system is the proliferation of fast food chains. McDonald's serves 45 million people every day in 29,000 restaurants in 121 countries. In a

year, that adds up to more than 16 billion meals.<sup>2</sup> Burger King, Wendy's, Pizza Hut, and Kentucky Fried Chicken follow close behind.

**Eating as an Eyepiece.** Fast food is a complex term, because it has an "old ways" meaning and an "industrial age" meaning. In the "old ways" sense, apples, pears, strawberries; oysters and clams; carrots and celery; nuts and raisins; and milk and cheese are fast foods. Once gathered, made, or purchased, they can be eaten fast without a lot of fuss. In the industrial age, fast foods are bottled and canned: sugary drinks, rapidly prepared frozen foods, and quick meals sold at fast food outlets. Once purchased, they too can be eaten fast.

The difference is that the "old ways" foods and drinks are more likely to be local and natural, while the industrial techno-foods and drinks are more likely to contain laboratory chemicals and come from factories. Foods and drinks of the industrial model are more likely to be techno-foods—manufactured in factories, "fresh" for up to a year, and determinedly uniform wherever in the world they are sold. They are truly "global."

This second group of foods is proliferating rapidly today. Just as the ambitions and wealth of a powerful royal kingdom 500 years ago triggered the Columbian Exchange and set off global dietary and cultural revolutions, the ambitions and wealth of modern international corporations have launched a second revolution, with more profound consequences. This is the "techno-food revolution," and its hallmark is global standardization.

**Globalized Food, Uniform Culture.** Anthropologists have long

argued that “to know what, when, how, and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one can see that Italian restaurants have different foods and rituals than Chinese restaurants, for example. In turn, these are different from Mexican, Indian, Irish, or Moroccan restaurants. The foods, preparations, and preferences of different peoples are distinctly dissimilar. These culturally-rooted food habits or “cuisines” are important markers that help to distinguish cultures from one another.

The *techno-food revolution* is a retail revolution intended to change what billions of people eat and drink. McDonald’s calls this its “global realization” goal, and it is well on its way to realizing it. As E. Schlosser notes in his book *Fast Food Nation*, the chain opens roughly five new restaurants each day, at least four of which are outside the United States. Within the next decade, it hopes to double that number. As a brand name, McDonald’s is now more recognizable around the world than Coca-Cola.<sup>4</sup>

This revolution relies upon products that are standardized, pasteurized, sanitized, and homogenized. It determinedly reflects a one-size-fits-all mentality. It makes no seasonal or geographic distinctions. Its logos and signs are the same the world over, even if they are printed in different languages.

These techno-foods and drinks are served in clean, well lit, conveniently located places, and often have public bathrooms, a novelty in some countries. The service personnel are trained to be efficient, polite, and cheerful. The foods and drinks are hygienic, filling, familiar, and predictable—and customers flock to them.

Fast food companies have made some efforts to accommodate the taste prefer-

ences of local cultures. In Japan, McDonald’s has experimented with such items as *MacChao* (Chinese fried rice), *tsukimi bage* (fried egg burger or “moon-viewing burger”), rib burgers, shrimp burgers, and teriyaki burgers. In Korea, experiments include melon-flavored milkshakes, and in Mexico, burritos.<sup>5</sup> Still, the restaurants and their offerings are recognizably western in every way.

The proliferation of fast food restaurants is about more than the foods being sold. Regarding the remarkable success of fast food in China, where there are now roughly 600 Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets, the president of a Beijing market research firm said, “Americans are selling not just products but a culture, and it is a culture that many Chinese want.”<sup>6</sup> Global firms selling techno-foods understand the inseparability of food and culture, and rely upon it to attract their customers.

To examine another part of this global techno-food revolution, we must look at how globalization is changing the offerings in local markets where people shop for food to cook in their home kitchens. Rather than the human-scale interactions and local variation of the traditional marketplace, we increasingly see large chain stores with enormous volume and central warehousing of stock that is reshipped to stores in many different locations.

As they have done with the techno-food in fast food restaurants, global food corporations are standardizing everything on market shelves: yogurt, biscuits, frozen vegetables and fruits, meat and poultry, dried grains, boxed cereals, cookies, crackers, and everything else in sight. Extending shelf life is the major initiative, which is why shelves are crowded with products that are “fresh” for a year, surely an oxymoron. New strains of produce are



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bred for durability and appearance rather than taste. With tomatoes, for example, we have seen the development and marketing of the "hard ripe."<sup>7</sup>

A parallel initiative is frozen "convenience home meals" that are clones of the offerings in fast food restaurants. This "value-adding," which means selling fifty cents worth of food for \$2.99 because it is "convenient," is very profitable. In the long term, these initiatives will shrink the range of the world's dizzying numbers of cuisines, reduce the varieties of fresh foods available in markets, and accelerate the push to extinguish the fires of home cooking.

Another impact of this techno-food revolution is in farming. A much smaller pool of large producers increasingly controls production for local markets that was formerly in the hands of small growers. For example, Mexican agronomists and economists worry that American agribusiness is a severe threat to the ability of small farmers in Mexico to sus-

can and other Latin populations at least since it was first cultivated 5,000 years ago, and has been central to their religion and cultures. Such rapid modernization creates great social dislocation in a developing economy.<sup>8</sup>

The combination of these trends viewed through the food eyepiece reveals the extent to which globalization is marginalizing some of the core elements of traditional food cultures: local cuisines, local food markets, and local farming.

**What Chance for Change?** Senior corporate executives who manage multinational food and drink corporations are fully aware of the controversies that the global techno-food revolution has stirred up about the dangers of globalization. Making the argument that "oftentimes the perception about global anger is somewhat different than the reality," Jack Greenberg, the chairman and CEO of McDonald's, noted that at the same time that several thousand protestors were

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tain themselves by growing corn. The remarkable cost efficiencies of heavily-subsidized American corporate farms and the workings of international trade agreements place American corn into the Mexican economy at a lower cost than Mexican farmers can meet, creating not only a cultural shift in Mexico, but also an economic drain. Since NAFTA went into effect, imports of cheap corn from the U.S. have increased nearly eighteen fold, making up a quarter of the supply. Corn has been the staple food of Mexi-

rioting at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, vandalizing multinational companies like McDonald's as a means to express their anger at globalization, more than 175 million customers were served in McDonald's restaurants around the world.<sup>9</sup> These comments reflect a degree of candor and self-awareness unusual among top-level corporate executives. They are also excellent evidence that the global techno-food companies are dismissive of the issues raised by protesters.

It is clear that the techno-food revolution has by no means run its course, but is continuing on its seemingly relentless path. It is also clear that its standardized techno-foods have a strong appeal for consumers and are steadily eroding food cultures in every corner of the world, as they are intended to do. Whether this erosion of the richness of diversity among food cultures matters in the long run of history is not a simple question.

Reaching for the horizon—the germ of globalization—is an indelible characteristic of humans; history is decisive about this. Today, electronic communications and air transportation continue to shrink the world and simplify the marketing of techno-food. It seems likely, then, that the techno-foods' global market penetration will continue to expand, and, as it does, distinct food cultures will continue to erode.

This does not, however, imply that the techno-food revolution is simply a clone, or even a variant, of the Columbian Exchange. It is very different, both qualitatively, and quantitatively. The animals and plants of the Columbian Exchange were "imported" to new places, but there were no standards for the use of the new foods, no marketing studies, and no sales reports. No one was in charge, and so each local culture used the foods in its own way, essentially reshaping its own culture to adapt to these changes. In Italy, corn became polenta, tomatoes were used in pasta sauces cooked with olive oil, and coffee became espresso.

But the foods of the techno-food revolution are *under control*, from farm to table. Foods are sold pre-packaged, pre-prepared, and standardized. As S. W. Mintz wrote in an article included in the book *Golden Arches East*, "The rule is not that all the foods must be the same, so much as

that those which *are* the same must not deviate from *the standard*. The customers may not be predictable; but the foods for which the establishment is known ought to be."<sup>10</sup> This is the essential mantra of the twenty-first century global corporation: control the standards, control the brand, and control the market.

At junctures such as this, when it is perhaps futile to identify finite cultural measures of whether globalization "matters," it is useful to find harbor in literature: "The ideal of a single civilization, implicit in the cult of progress and technology, impoverishes and mutilates us," wrote Octavio Paz. "Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life."

**Globalized Food, Degraded Nutrition.** It is far easier to project a continued expansion in the global spread of industrialized techno-food than it is to project a reversal; no effective countervailing force to this process exists. But a developing oppositional current may be found in growing concern about the nutritional value of techno-food and its implications for human health.

In the last three years, national and international public health officials have raised alarm about the rates of increase in weight gain and obesity. These increases were, until recently, noted largely in western countries, and ascribed to unhealthy "westernized" diets and declining physical activity.

At the end of 2001, the U.S. surgeon general released a report titled "Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity," saying that these conditions had reached "epidemic proportions" because 61 percent of U.S. adults and 13 percent of children and adolescents were overweight.<sup>11</sup>

## Will the awareness of the rapid global spread of techno-foods, with their negative nutrition profiles, be enough to counter the trend?

To put these figures into perspective, there are now twice the number of overweight children and three times as many overweight adolescents as there were in 1980. Without a reversal in this trend, the surgeon general warns, "obesity may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking."<sup>12</sup>

This report repeats the conclusions of every prior study that has analyzed the reasons for weight gain over the last twenty years: "excess calorie consumption and/or inadequate physical activity,"<sup>13</sup> and that "it is also known that a healthy diet and adequate physical activity aid in maintaining a healthy weight, and among overweight and obese persons, can promote weight loss."<sup>14</sup> Recently, many non-western, lesser-developed countries have shown similar signs of impending problems with obesity, with the accompanying risks of diabetes, cancer, and digestive and heart disease.

A dozen years ago the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized the likelihood of this epidemic, and identified its dietary cause: an excess of energy-dense foods rich in fat and sugars, rather than complex carbohydrates.<sup>15</sup>

WHO's description, in fact, aptly describes techno-foods: energy-dense

burgers, fried chicken, fried potatoes, fried onion rings, sugary drinks, creamy shakes, cheese food (as opposed to cheese), and fried fruit desserts. It is difficult to locate complex carbohydrates in techno-food establishments: their bread offerings are made with highly refined white flour, which the body transforms into sugars almost as soon as it is eaten. The only evident fruits and vegetables in most techno-food establishments are the occasional leaf of iceberg lettuce, slice of tomato, or sugary fruit drink, and these are only token gestures when compared to real nutritional needs. This is, as the WHO report notes, a precise prescription for population-wide ill health. It is also a deep crack in the heretofore-impenetrable armor of the global techno-food revolution.

**A Look Ahead.** The important questions about the globalization of food are not whether food is being globalized more rapidly than ever before in human history (it is), nor whether culture diversity and richness are being eroded (they are). The key question is this: Will the awareness of the rapid global spread of techno-foods, with their negative nutrition profiles, be enough to counter the trend?

### NOTES

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