

Commodification of Nationalist Imagery: Fetishes of Everyday Life

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It became clear during the 1990s that there was an intriguing change in the way that nationalist images were circulating in Turkey. One of the signs that marked this change, which became more visible in the 2000s, was the emergence of commodified nationalist images in the form of t-shirts, badges, necklaces, stickers, and mugs, to name just a few examples. National images became portable and took their place on the shelves of the market, as well as being diffused in other realms of everyday life by being carried around. In this paper, my aim is to explore the ways that the commodification of nationalist imagery affects how national communities are imagined and performed. Analyzing how a “visual community” is formed through commodified national symbols and how the nation is “consumed” and “fetishized” in general sheds light on the ways that contemporary nationalism works. It also allows exploring the complex interplay between capitalism, commodity products, and the “national Thing”, as well as the tactics people develop in the face of both the rise and the crisis of nationalism(s).

COMMODIFICATION OF NATIONALIST IMAGERY: FETISHES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

This paper focuses on the commodification of nationalist imagery and its implications for the ways in which national identity is imagined, constructed and performed, by focusing on Turkey. Through the analysis of the emergence of national symbols in commodity form and how existing national symbols and commodities transform each other, I hope to provide some insights into the way contemporary nationalism works, both in Turkey and elsewhere, in collaboration with popular culture and capitalist commodity market. First, I will focus on how the process of commodification has influenced the ways that national symbols circulate and function in the everyday life of the nation. Then, I want to bring the notion of fetish into the discussion of nationalized commodities, as a conceptual lens through which the relationship between people and these objects can be analyzed further. Fetish, due to the reasons that will become clear soon, will help me to explore the role of the commodity and the market in perpetuating nationalist fantasies.

The 1980 coup d'état in Turkey marks the beginning of a neoliberal restructuring of society, with a commitment to free market capitalism and privatization. The neoliberalization process and the expansion of consumerist practices that started in the 1980s, continued in the 1990s, and increased in the AKP (Justice and Development Party) period in the 2000s, stand at the basis of the process of the market becoming an umbrella for everything, including the commodified nationalist images. It is important to note that, during the AKP period in the 2000s, the class conflict that emerged between the old Republican bourgeoisie and newly emerging bourgeoisie with a more Islamic background and less commitment to Kemalist ideology is also a significant factor behind the diffusion of these products. The idea and fear that secularism and Kemalism are under threat due to the politicized Islam has become a rather widespread perspective among the urban, secular, middle-upper class. This became one of the most significant groups of people that uses the nationalist products that I am talking about, as a way to deal with their fear of losing the economical, political and cultural privileges that they maintain.

As a result of these processes, nationalist symbols that, previously, had been included in everyday life mostly through state institutions or as government-imposed public sphere items, took their place on the shelves of the market in miniaturized forms and became things that could be bought, sold, carried and worn, in the form of t-shirts, badges, necklaces, car stickers, mugs, or clothing, to name just some examples. At this point, it is important to ask what is new about these products and what happens when national identity is turned into a commodity, or rather performed through commodities.

Does the commodification of nationalist images, icons, and symbols signify a democratizing process in which nationalist items are no longer diffused top-down, but become more easily accessible to everyone? Is this a necessary step in the desacralization of icons? Or does commodification help the icons to penetrate everyday life and the private sphere even more thoroughly? Another important questions is: whether we are witnessing a process of the instrumentalization of commodities for nationalistic purposes, or a process of the instrumentalization of national values for capitalist consumption purposes, or both.

Tanil Bora, a prominent theorist working on Turkish nationalism, argues that the most striking development in contemporary Turkey is the transfer of the universe of nationalism to the field of popular culture. He analyzes this development and questions the effects of commodification. He states:

Many national symbols become a kind of “pop” coat of arms, and thus can be worn relatively independent of a specific political meaning. National symbols

become trademarks, and their consumption is engendered. Thus, a dual process begins. On the one hand, nationalistic “exhibitionism” dominates the everyday and public arenas, and on the other, by “becoming pop” it becomes tamed. (450)

As Bora says, the domination of everyday life and public space by “nationalistic exhibitionism” is indeed one of the most significant results of the flirtation between nationalist imagery and popular culture. However, the idea that the “popification” of national symbols deprives them of their political meaning does not adequately reflect the consequences of the encounter between nationalist imagery and the commodity market. It prevents us from acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between people and these objects. I argue that popular culture and the commodity market, instead of “taming” and “cheapening” nationalist images and stripping them of their political meaning, allows them to diffuse into other realms of life and in other forms than before. It opens them to the further investment of fears, desires, and conflicts.

Commodification, then, not only keeps the political meanings of these objects intact and expands their production and circulation, but also opens up a space for that meaning to be interpreted and performed through small everyday life rituals such as wearing a t-shirt with a nationalist slogan, putting on a necklace of Atatürk, or lighting someone’s cigarette using a lighter decorated with the national flag. These seemingly routine and insignificant everyday consumption practices, in fact, has an enormous effect on how exclusion and inclusion practices are employed and how self and other are imagined. Compared to the official monumentalism and imagery, miniaturized and portable consumption goods are more suitable to be customized and loaded with affects, therefore, they are perhaps more effective in mediating personal relationships in everyday encounters. They transform the commodity market, as well as the body, into one of the sites of national identity production.

However, it is important to be cautious about the idea that the market became the sole basis of the construction of citizenship, which is symptomatic of an inclination in contemporary literature dealing with globalization and consumption to theorize everything around consumption as contingent upon it and as strengthening its power and dominance. I am not arguing that the dissemination of national symbols and images in the market merely reinforces consumption-based subjectivities and pulls another social phenomenon into consumption capitalism’s orbit. Rather, I argue that it is not only consumer identity that is reinforced by the dissemination of national images, but also national identity, which is spread and strengthened by the dissemination of consumption products. This is a good example of how political processes that are thought to decrease the effectiveness of nation-states such as globalization and neoliberalization, in fact, form new alliances with the existing structures like nationalism. In a way, nationalism is reproduced while being consumed and national commodities emerge as fields where fantasies are invested, displayed and contested and through which the relationship with the others is negotiated.

In order to see how they turn into fields where affects like desire, fear, love and hate are invested and negotiated, I want to focus on the concept of fetish. One of the most-well known definitions of the fetish obviously comes from Freud. Freud says that the fetish is “a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego” (199). It is a substitute that has been invented to protect against (the fear of) castration. According to Freud, one of the main characteristics of the substitute is that it both protects against castration and reminds of the horror of it. This ambivalence in the function of the fetish, oscillating between fulfillment and lack, is important to understand the ways in which national commodities work.

Louise Kaplan, in her book *Cultures of Fetishism*, explores fetishism strategy and provides a bridge between the psychoanalytical understanding and the Marxist cultural critique of (commodity) fetishism. Kaplan, after making her critical stance clear on Freud’s violent

rhetoric towards women and his claim that only men can be fetishists, nevertheless follows the psychoanalytical path and defines a fetish as the “substitution of something tangible for something that is otherwise ephemeral and enigmatic” (5). Kaplan sees the reason for people not worshipping the gods or spirits directly, but instead needing tangible objects, as the urge to possess and thereby manipulate the powers in question. Thus, for her, the need to transform something unfamiliar and intangible into something familiar and tangible is one of the major principles of the fetishism strategy. This is another point why I think fetish has explanatory value when it comes to understanding how national commodities work.



Picture 1: “The strength you need is existent in the noble blood in your veins”

Let us look at the image above (Picture 1) to see how the two characteristics of the fetish that I mentioned can be observed. This is one example of the many different t-shirts with nationalist slogans or images that became popular in the recent years in Turkey. There is a sentence by Atatürk on the t-shirt, which says: “the strength you need is already embedded in the noble blood in your veins”. A person unfamiliar with the context would most likely find the sentence confusing and the reference unclear: Who needs strength? Whose blood? Why is it noble? Who is speaking? Yet, the message is not that mysterious for someone who is familiar with any nation-state setting in which the citizens are frequently interpellated as “you”: the undefined “you” is the Turkish citizen, who, according to the speaker, carries special features. The fact that someone who has lived in Turkey has been exposed to this sentence numerous times at school, in ceremonies, in textbooks, and other contexts, makes it easier to read its implications. But there is a difference between being exposed to this sentence and carrying it on you. Wearing this t-shirt makes a statement of belonging to a particular group, to a category (being Turkish). The t-shirt, like the fetish, turns a category, that is hard, if not impossible, to define, to grasp, into something tangible.

Indeed, the t-shirt makes some empowering statements: the strength of the Turkish people, the noble blood, the glorious past (the war scene depicted under the country in red), a strong military nature, a strong nation (the map of the country), a powerful personality as the prototype of the nation, and so on. All these signs point to supposed commonalities among

Turkish people created through an essentialist argument. The commonality constructed in the sentence is strongly based on difference; the subtext, which is not hard to decipher, is that Turkish people are strong as opposed to non-Turkish people who do not have noble blood coursing through their veins. "Noble blood" seems to refer to many things, but, at the same time, to nothing solid. The use of this notion is symptomatic of the discourses surrounding national identity, not only because of its racial and essentialist connotations, but also because of its tautological and intangible character. One is a strong Turkish person because one has noble blood and the reason one has noble blood is that one is a strong Turkish person. Here, the question of the foundation of national identity starts to haunt us again.

Certain characteristics (strength and nobility in this case) are attributed to members of the nation as the basis of their national identity. Yet, national identity is never only this or that feature or the sum of all the features that are thought to construct it, which are in fact similar for different nations. The supposedly distinct features and culture that national identity is based on is, as Balibar says, "our culture", "as if it were a precious genetic inheritance, to be transmitted uncontaminated and unweakened" (qtd. in Billig, 71). The t-shirt becomes the proof of such a pseudo-genetic inheritance. The commodity object, then, functions as the fetishized materialization of the void of the transmitted inheritance. It renders the immaterial quality of national identity material and tangible, and therefore easier to deal with, to represent and to impose.

Zizek's conceptualization of "the national Thing" is fruitful in order to further explore the lack that material objects fill, as well as the role of fear and fantasy in this process. Žižek, arguing for the necessity of a psychoanalytical perspective in order to understand the relationship of national subjects with the nation, states that the bonds within a community cannot be reduced to a symbolic identification: the ties between the members of a community always imply a relationship to "the Thing" (which is the lost, stolen Enjoyment, in Lacanian terms):

This relationship toward the Thing...is what is at stake when we speak of the menace to our "way of life" presented by the Other: it is what is threatened when, for example, a white Englishman is panicked because of the growing presence of "aliens". What he wants to defend is not reducible to the so-called set of values that offer support to national identity. National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing. (201)

According to Žižek, we cannot define the Thing by saying more than that it is "itself," that it is "the real Thing". The ambiguous thing that we call "our way of life" is the only answer that can be given when asked what constitutes the Thing and how it can be recognized.

All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its feasts, its rituals of mating, its initiation ceremonies, in short, all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes its enjoyment. (200)

The Thing is, then, something accessible only to the members of the community, something that others cannot grasp but that is still perceived as constantly menaced by them. It is the belief that the community shares a "way of life" that is threatened by others and the idea that every member of the community believes in "the Thing". It is in fact constructed by this belief itself. Thus, the whole meaning of the Thing is the fact that 'it means something' to people.

Therefore, the t-shirt, the fetish, is not only shown to the people in opposition to whom the consumers position themselves, but also to people who are like them, who feel the same threat. This makes it even more important to display the fetish items to people who also use

them. Through this display, the assumption that other members of the community believe in the Thing too is confirmed and a visual community is created around this assumption. At this point, again, we see the contractual function of the fetish. The fetish, which is a thing itself and which fulfills the lack of the national Thing, guarantees that the Thing is something that is agreed upon and believed in by the members of the community at stake.

However, this is not a happy agreement free of anxiety, fear or obsession. The panic of the Englishman that Žižek refers to is far from scarce in many European countries today, with increasingly strong anti-immigrant winds blowing both on a governmental level and in everyday civil life. In Turkey, as elsewhere, the existence of “threatening others” never ceased to be a strong constitutive factor of nationalist discourses. The threat from others or other ways of living is one of the strongest uniting factors for the community of believers in the Thing. As Sara Ahmed puts it, “the reading of the others as hateful, aligns the imagined subject with rights and the imagined nation with ground” (118).

Wearing a t-shirt that declares the nobility of the group that the wearer is part of, works like a shield, protecting him or her against the perceived crisis or threat caused by other ways of living, which again shows that fear and fantasy are crucial factors in forming the ground on which these commodities proliferate. Ozyurek quotes a woman she interviewed who started to wear an Atatürk pin after Islamists gained power for the first time in the 1994 local elections:

When I am walking on the street, I want to show that there are people who are dedicated to Atatürk’s principles. Look, now there are veiled women walking around even in this neighborhood. Their numbers have increased. I push my chest forward to show them my pin as I pass by them. I have my Atatürk against their veils. (378)

The pin on the woman’s chest that she pushes forward like a clove of garlic against a vampire, the “noble” t-shirt and many other “ethnic pantheons” like that can be seen as ways to cope with fear and anxiety, as well as to manipulate the perceived crisis to ensure that the social structure will be organized again around the nationalists’ beliefs, acts, and ways of life. They are examples of the acute task that secularist nationalists assign themselves of mapping what is the proper appearance of citizens. These objects seem to provide a gateway to real, proper Turkishness, to the national Thing, which is actually, as I have argued, not a real thing. The materiality of the fetish is employed against the immateriality of the National Thing. Therefore, these commodities reflect the anxiety of losing something that is actually not there.

By doing that, as I have argued, they provide a sense of control and power, not to forget pleasure. In fact, one of the people I interviewed said that there is an “electrical current” between his body and Atatürk’s image on the t-shirt, and that whenever he wears the t-shirt he feels both “strengthened” and “chilled” (or “got the shivers”). He added that he feels like he is embraced the whole day and protected against the dangers. The sexual overtones of the metaphors used by people while talking about their motivations or experiences of wearing these t-shirts (like “electrical current”, “getting the shivers”, “being embraced”) are especially significant when we think of these objects as fetishes. Here, the importance of the body becomes evident again, as the source and mediator of affects. W.J.T. Mitchell states that while idols want human sacrifice and totems want to be your friend, fetishes “want to be beheld –to ‘be held’ close by, or even reattached to, the body of the fetishist”.

Affects like pleasure and fear co-exist in relation to these objects. This ambivalence is precisely the one I mentioned in relation to the logic of fetishism. On the one hand, the fetish protects from castration, which can be interpreted as the fear of the absence of the sense of belonging, of identity, of a protector or a father. One feels stronger for having the fetish, which substitutes for the troubling lack. On the other hand, the fetish also reminds of the

horror of castration. Therefore, the wearer of a nationalist t-shirt also feels “chilled” by the presence and imminence of “the father’s” image on his body, since it invokes the fear of the lack. After all, the t-shirt is worn because something is under threat, there is a perceived crisis in the society.

Finally, it is crucial to mention that this urge of being protected from the threat in the face of a crisis and of making the slippery ground of national identity more material is more easily understood considering the failure of nationalism in fulfilling its promise to offer people a unified community and a totalized identity, as well as the precarity that globalization and neoliberal policies confers onto people’s everyday life, not knowing where one is located in the transforming power relations of the world and facing an uncertain future. The change of power relations in contemporary Turkey amplifies this sense of insecurity, leading to the employment of the very tools that the free market provides to overcome the insecurity that it creates. I tried to show how, in this context, commodity products gain a significant role, not by taming and turning national identity into one product among many, but as fetishes through which national identity is constructed, performed and asserted.

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