

Chapter 11

Rap Music in Turkey: Globalization vs. Glocalization in Communicating Political Messages and Dissent

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ABSTRACT

Benefiting from the theoretical debate between globalization and glocalization, this chapter aims to shed light on the emerging role of rap music as an alternative venue for political communication in a polarized country, Turkey. The chapter will discuss the political contributions of the selected underground Turkish rappers – Norm Ender, Sagopa Kajmer and Rapzan Belagat – on the public debate in the country about identity, human rights, and other socio-political issues that go beyond the traditional “Kemalist versus Kurdish”, “Kemalist versus Islamist”, and “Islamist versus Kurdish” divide. This study suggests that the Turkish rap and its varieties reflect a complex set of interactions between the local and the global in line with the glocalization approach.

INTRODUCTION

Rap music is generally perceived as representing Afro-American culture and its spread to different parts of the world is explained with the help of various global approaches. While some emphasize the imperialistic ambitions behind the spread of the Western culture – as captured by the term “globalization” (Ritzer, 2003) –, others point to the processes of “glocalization” (Robertson 1995) through which the global “invites” new local identities and cultural movements.

According to the “globalization” approach, the spread of rap to different parts of the world is often seen as an imposition of American culture on non-Western societies. Therefore, it leads to domestic resistance against the penetration of an external, alien culture that attempts to undermine the “authenticity” of local cultures. According to Ritzer (2003), global culture is an “empty signifier”, if not “nothing”. Rather than adding value and meaning to local identities, globalization serves to standardize and

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decontextualize the cultural norms and practices to the extent that the latter becomes “relatively devoid of distinctive content” (Ritzer & Ryan, 2002, pp. 51). Hence, globalization erodes “something” and spreads “nothing” in its place. Both scholars further argue that:

Conversely, something is defined here as (largely) full forms that are indigenously conceived and controlled and relatively rich in distinctive content. Thus, it is easier to export empty forms (nothing) throughout the globe than it is forms that are loaded with content (something). The latter [something] are more likely to be rejected by at least some cultures and societies because the content is more likely to conflict with local content and be found offensive by more of the natives. In contrast, empty forms are less likely to come into conflict with local forms and since they are devoid of distinctive content, it would be difficult for them to arouse anxiety in the natives. (Ritzer & Ryan, 2002, pp. 51)

Globalization is strongly criticized by advocates of “glocalization” for taking culture as a unitary and fixed phenomenon, thus overlooking the complex transformational processes such as cultural hybridization and vernacularization (Robertson, 1992, 1995, 2014). Moreover, the assumption that there is an authentic culture which needs protection against external trends has become obsolete due to the blurring of the boundaries between domestic and foreign “cultures”. Even the traditional distinction between the West and the East has been open to debate as captured by the developing literature on post-Westernization (Rumford, 2008; Delanty, 2003, 2006). Accordingly, “glocalization” scholars emphasize the need for moving beyond an oppositional dichotomous approach that reduces cultural encounters to hegemony (convergence) and resistance. In the case of Turkish rap (T-rap), rather than a simple transfer of the American or ‘empty’ culture to Turkey, glocalization implies the rise of new hybrid identities and cultures that cannot be explained with unidimensional accounts.

This chapter discusses the rise of rap music in Turkey as an alternative venue for the youth to participate in the public debate on social and political problems in the context of globalization versus glocalization debate. Globalization approach presupposes a perpetual antagonism and tension between the local and the global. While defining the local as a ‘victim’ of the global, globalization assumes that local cultures, identities and norms are undermined by the global. Hence, domestic resistance is a natural consequence of globalization. What distinguishes globalization from other approaches is its conception of globalization as “empty signifier”. Globalization implies that domestic resistance is likely to decrease, paving the way for the spread of global “nothing”. In this sense, it is plausible to argue that the spread of the global disempowers local agency and identity. It challenges how one defines one’s self and determines the most appropriate norms, identity and behaviour.

Alternatively, the glocalization approach rejects the claim that the local and the global are mutually exclusive. Globalization can empower local cultures, norms and identities. Furthermore, glocalization implies that the domestic resistance against globalization is unlikely to disappear. It rather allows the local to adjust itself to the global without having its authenticity completely eroded. In other words, glocalization assumes that globalization both transforms and empowers the local in a complex and unpredictable manner. Hence, it is an oversimplification to define the global as merely replacing the local. Instead, the global-local interactions pave the way for new, hybrid identities that reflect both global and local notions in an uneven way. Accordingly, contrary to globalization, the glocalization perspective allows for the possibility that domestic agency becomes empowered under the effects of globalization.

While discussing the rise of rap music in Turkey as an alternative venue for the youth to participate in the public debate on social and political problems, this chapter suggests investigating whether the

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