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Fate of Turkish Traditional Crafts: A Case of Economic, Legal and Political Marginalisation

Traditional handcrafts have been going through a somehow familiar historical course in Turkey. Through the establishment phase of the nation-state, from mid-1920's, the new republic had a strong claim on the concept of traditional crafts as a cultural legacy, a constitutive element of the to-be-constructed national identity for about three decades. Exhibitions, ethnographic museums, academic studies were common practices employed to reinforce the nationalist idea of a continuous and noble craft tradition as a proof of the existence of the national culture. However, the same process of republican development also aimed to create an industrial society. The radical change in production and distribution processes with succeeding introduction of industrialisation, state capitalism, corporate capitalism and free-market economy not only made it impossible to sustain the craft practice as the dominant mode of production, but also transformed the cultural meaning of crafts. Today, many practitioners either complain about the lack of official support from the state, and consider quitting the practice because of monetary problems, or switch to a so-called degenerate mode of craft production, that is, for cultural tourism.

The responses from the academia to this process can be considered in two groups: The first is the conservative-idealist approach, which tags the process as degeneration and reproduces a nostalgic view, that is for the former comprehension of crafts as tradition to be saved from the corrupting effects of globalisation in both economical and cultural terms. The second group, which can be called the reformists, claims to have understood the contemporary rules of the game and advises the craftsmen to fully integrate their work with the new economy, to become the agents who create the touristic local image to be competitive among the other local images. Although the legal agenda of Turkey seems to be ignorant of local crafts, gradually abandoning the cultural-missionary position of the state, the UNESCO definition for 'cultural legacy' leaves room for crafts in the area of "intangible cultural heritage", finding itself a place in legal arrangements for tourism.

Since the general concept of sustainability has scarcely figured in the laws and legislations of the "developing" economy of Turkey, considerations of traditional craft have never been discussed in terms of the sustainable development. The sustainability issue enters the crafts agenda only in terms of the impossibility of sustaining craft production without referring to a shallow understanding of local cultural souvenirs. This paper would attempt to explore the above-mentioned legal, economic and political processes, and to present examples from a case study on local crafts as cultural tourism products and to discuss the economically unsustainable condition of traditional crafts in Turkey.