

The Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Turkey [ISBN: 9780367209025] /

edited by Joost Jongerden (Routledge, 2021).

Chapter 33

The quest for cultural power

Islamism, culture and art in Turkey¹

Özgür Yaren

ORCID: 0000-0002-0760-0303

Cenk Saraçoğlu

ORCID: 0000-0002-4797-4879

Irmak Karademir-Hazır

ORCID: 0000-0003-1568-4612

Abstract

While many AKP supporters have achieved significant economic and political upward mobility and the party consolidated its power to the extent of operating a de facto party-state over the past two decades, AKP officials' and Islamists' discontent with a perceived deprivation of cultural power has continued unabated. In recent years, this discourse of being historically bereft of cultural power has accompanied conspicuous interventionism in the field of culture through the use of the state's ideological apparatus and economic resources. The first years of the AKP's reign were shaped by liberal cultural policies aiming to withdraw the state (and its support) from

the realm of culture and art. As the AKP consolidated its power, however, cultural policies made a U-turn toward interventionism, proactively aiming to create a conservative art field. In this chapter, we try to situate AKP officials' and Islamists' yearning for cultural hegemony within the general political and ideological context of contemporary Turkey. We then examine the forms in which the AKP utilized the state's ideological apparatus and economic resources to intervene in the cultural field. Lastly, we will assert that such recent attempts to transform the field of culture from above is a historically specific phenomenon that cannot be simply grasped as yet another manifestation of a long-standing polarization between secularists and conservatives in Turkey.

Introduction

As recognized by many, one of the ideological building blocks of political Islam in Turkey has been a victimization narrative (e.g. Açıkel, [1996](#); Yılmaz, [2017](#)). This narrative is built on a claim that Islamists have been suffering in all spheres of life since the hegemony of a dominant Kemalist, secular, and Westernist ideology was established. Articulation of this idea in the political field not only facilitated the formation of—albeit short-term—political alliances with other opponents of the Kemalist establishment but also maintained Islamists' group identity (Hazır, [2019](#)). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) continued to circulate and reproduce this narrative even after it managed to win many significant political achievements. However, this narrative recently began to shift slightly, this time highlighting how this victimhood continues to be effective in some areas more than others. For instance, a popular claim circulating lately in Turkey is that the conservative segments of society could not achieve as striking of an upward progression in the art field as they did in the domains of politics and economy. Islamist thinkers and opinion leaders strongly argued that the established art forms

have been under the control of an elitist circle (secular, leftist,² Kemalist;³ interchangeable targets) that has excluded conservatives from the art field to date (Keten, [2018](#)). Islamic-conservative politicians and opinion leaders have repeatedly complained that they lack cultural power. This discourse of “exclusion” and victimization continued even after governmental positions and lucrative investment opportunities were deliberately allocated to individuals with conservative and pious backgrounds. Even though many AKP supporters have achieved significant economic and political upward mobility, and the party consolidated its power to the extent of operating a de facto party-state over the past two decades, AKP officials’ and Islamists’ discontent with a perceived deprivation of cultural power has continued unabated. According to Erdoğan, the cultural field has been hitherto under the control of a handful of “marginal elites,” who typically despise both the conservative laypeople and his own party for being “uneducated” and ignorant of “art, theater, cinema, poetry” (Ferguson, [2014](#): 78). The same discourse was articulated in the mission statement of the pro-government Islamist weekly magazine *Cins* (Sezer, [2019](#)). According to its chief editor, İsmail Kılıçarslan, *Cins*’s main aim was to fight the cultural hegemony established by the Kemalists. Sertaç Timur Demir (20178, quoted in Bora), a pro-government academic in the field of media and communication, left-wing secularists have secured the cultural field and reproduce the hegemony of the founding ideology. He argues that conservatives have been facing this for more than a hundred years, talking about it for half a century, and searching for ways to be equal for the last 20 years.

In recent years, this discourse of being historically bereft of cultural power has accompanied a conspicuous interventionism in the field of culture through the use of the state’s ideological apparatus and economic resources. The first years of the AKP’s reign were shaped by liberal cultural policies aiming to withdraw the state (and its support) from the realm of culture

and art (see Birkiye, [2009](#); and for a rather belated survey on this trend, see Aksoy & Şeyben, [2015](#)). Nevertheless, as they consolidated their power, cultural policies made a U-turn towards interventionism, proactively aiming to create a conservative art field. These interventionist policies rested on the effective use of bureaucracy and ideological tools (schools, universities, public broadcasting, financially controlled private media mouthpieces, and so on) to enact the strategy of promoting proponents' artwork while curbing the perceived opponent producers. In view of this, the government prepared financial support schemas for ideologically and aesthetically favourable cultural producers and enforced obstructions or bans on dissident cultural products and dissident producers. It was through this strategy that the official authorities sought to supplant the cultural initiatives of autonomous civil society organizations with the well-financed activities of GONGOs (government-organized nongovernmental organizations). One salient example is the prestigious İstanbul Film Festival organized by İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV), a foundation defined as a cultural establishment, facing a rival, the Bosphorus Film Festival, organized by a GONGO, which was founded for creating an alternative scene. In this chapter, we first try to situate the AKP officials' and Islamists' yearning for cultural hegemony within the general political and ideological context of contemporary Turkey. We then examine the forms in which the AKP has utilized the state's ideological apparatus and economic resources to intervene in the cultural field. Lastly, we assert that such recent attempts to transform the field of culture from above are a historically specific phenomenon that cannot be simply grasped as yet another manifestation of a long-standing polarization between secularists and conservatives in Turkey.

Contextualizing “cultural power”

The claim for cultural power came to the fore more openly at a particular stage of the AKP’s rule.⁴ The transition from a seemingly “liberal” discourse of withdrawing the state from the field of art to the strategy of crude interventionism is indeed a manifestation of a shift in the ideological strategies that the AKP pursued for its hegemony at large. A neo-Ottomanist and Islamist-nationalist outlook blended with a neoliberal economic vision with anti-Kemalist overtones has always been a core element of the societal vision of the founders and leading figures of this party (Atasoy, [2009](#); Şen, [2010](#)). The pretension of representation in the sphere of the state having allegedly overlooked the conservative/pious majority and its cultural values was the hallmark of right-wing political forces in Turkey from the Democratic Party (DP) throughout the 1950s to Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party (ANAP) in the 1980s (Coşar & Özman, [2004](#); Mert, [2007](#)). However, the AKP, which has presented itself as the heir to these right-wing figures and parties (Taşkın, [2008](#)), has diverged from this tradition in two interrelated ways. First of all, it has claimed not only to *represent* these supposedly “victimized and excluded” masses but also to *identify* with them, juxtaposing itself on behalf of the nation against the Kemalist establishment. Second, the AKP did not limit itself to incorporating and/or reconciling the conservative conception of “nation” with the established Kemalist view of Turkish nationalism. Rather, by reformulating the conception of “nation” in line with Sunni religious values, the AKP embarked on a comprehensive ideological struggle to dethrone the Kemalist conception of nation and supplant it with a new vision of nationalism (Saraçoğlu and Demirkol, [2015](#)).

Notwithstanding these core ideological premises, the party was also pragmatic and flexible enough to engage in alliances with divergent political forces to consolidate its power in Turkish politics. Depending on the course of social struggles and the changing balances of power in the

political sphere, the AKP utilized varying ideological strategies to circumvent some obstacles in its search for a monopoly of power. The recent claim for “cultural hegemony” or “cultural power” needs to be contextualized within these shifting ideological strategies.

In the first periods of its rule (roughly between 2002 and 2009), due to the continued presence of non-Islamist, secularist cadres in the state bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the military, the AKP was faced with difficulties in building and consolidating its political authority. This hindered its efforts to transform the social sphere and ideological domain in accordance with its own Islamist-nationalist outlook. As such, what characterized this period was the AKP’s quest for obtaining as much broad international and domestic support as possible. The aim was to embark upon some pioneering ventures towards crippling and even eliminating the persistent Kemalist influence in the state’s security apparatus and bureaucracy. At the international level, the ongoing European Union integration process required concomitant legal and institutional reforms that increase the power and autonomy of elected governments. This functioned as a favourable framework through which these ventures were advanced in a legitimate fashion (Çınar, [2018](#)). At the domestic level, in its arduous assault against what it referred to as “militaristic and bureaucratic tutelage,” the party sought to obtain the support of different political and social forces. These forces included liberals, socialists, and the Kurds, long disgruntled with the Kemalist-secularist establishment. In order to obtain legitimacy, the AKP sought to brandish itself as the representative of civilian politics, pluralism, and democratic transition, fighting against a ramshackle but simultaneously overbearing Kemalist elite long clinging to the state bureaucracy. It was in this stage that the AKP used a neoliberal discourse of distancing the state from the field of art.

By the end of 2010, the AKP seemed to have managed to remove both the ideological and the political influence of the Kemalist-inclined cadres in the military, judiciary, and bureaucracy. The Fethullah Gülen congregation, which was a staunch ally of the AKP until the mid-2010s, mobilized its clandestine cadres in the state to organize a series of mass trials. These trials targeted hundreds of suspects including members of the army and bureaucracy, lawyers, and academics, as well as the politicians and elected mayors of the legal party of the Kurdish movement. Some journalists were also prosecuted for organizing a coup plot against the government. As the AKP further strengthened its control over the state thanks to its alliance with the Gülen congregation, it shifted from an inclusive hegemonic project to a strategy of total control of the fields of political, legal, and social space. This grip would not leave any room for opposition to its authority. The Gezi uprising in 2013, characterized by a massive reaction against these authoritarian politics and neoliberal economic outlook, was suppressed by brutal force. The growing power of the Kurdish movement under the People's Democratic Party (HDP), as manifested in the June 2015 elections, was curbed by the "remilitarization" of the Kurdish issue. The June elections were followed by the complete breakdown of negotiations between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the AKP and a subsequent spiral of armed conflict. Furthermore, the 2016 coup attempt pioneered by Gülenists was pushed back successfully and that was used as a pretext to further suppress opposition. Thus, control over the political and legal fields has so far been successfully achieved by means of an effective mobilization of both the coercive and the ideological apparatus of the state. Nevertheless, such an increase in political and legal capacity has not yet managed to spill over into the fields of art and culture, where the Islamists and nationalists are far from securing a monopoly. It was in this particular context that Erdoğan made the following remarks on May 28, 2017:

Politically ruling is one thing. Socially and culturally ruling is another thing entirely. We have been in power for 14 years but we still have problems with ruling in the social and cultural field.⁵

The AKP's claim for "cultural power" was by no means limited to the objective of extending its growing domination to another sector of society. This interventionism also aimed to prevent "the field of culture" from becoming a reservoir for the themes, symbols, and discourses of any potential mass opposition or mobilization. Such a concern became conspicuous especially after the Gezi uprising, where not only did publicly revered artists help the movement gain legitimacy and popularity but the protesters themselves used various forms of arts to express their demands and defiance (Taş & Taş, [2014](#); Aytekin, [2017](#)).

The march to culture

Through the bumpy path to full control over social and cultural space, the AKP sees the field of art as an "uncontrolled" territory that needs to be taken over with a new "native and national culture." It has to be saved, according to their interpretation, from the preponderance of the Westernist, self-colonialist,⁶ unrooted, non-native, materialist, individualist, and synthetic style of the established secular elites.⁷ This diagnosis led the AKP government to take effective measures to alter the cultural panorama.

The new interventionist cultural policy manifests itself with several symptoms:

- Subversive critiques of established art fields
- Condemnation of certain segments of popular culture

- Revival of nativist roots
- Substitution of art with traditional crafts

The discourse of the Islamist-conservative cultural claim is replete with antagonistic and reactionary sentiments. It is preoccupied with a subversive critique of the established art field, leaving the goal of creating an alternative canon short-winded. This dimension matches up with the current global trends of right-wing populism, characterized by ruthless criticism of elites perceived as the conveyors of creeping rootless cosmopolitanism against “native and national” values (Vieten, [2018](#)). This anti-elitist stance is a handy strategy typically appealing to ultra-right movements around the world (Mudde, [2004](#); Brubaker, [2020](#)). It rests on channelling the bitter sentiments of powerless masses against the economic and political elites towards scapegoats selected among intellectuals (Vieten and Poynting, [2016](#): 534). In Turkey, this strategy is accompanied by the consecration of certain aspects of popular culture as the true taste of the nation. As a vaguely defined (but nevertheless doubtlessly linked with Turco-Islamic identity) category of popular morals and taste, folk wisdom has been juxtaposed against the established art of “rootless elites.” The locus of this so-called “Anatolian wisdom” is the provincial Anatolian heartland, which strives to retain its purity against the cosmopolitan cities harbouring the cultural elites. The “elite” trope exists primarily as a scapegoat, and it serves as a negative reference point in the process of exalting “the native and the national.” As such, so-called native and national art is dependent on what it needs to subvert; this obstructs the Islamists from developing an alternative framework for the art field and limits them to a reactionary position in either sense of the word.

Nevertheless, when it comes to certain elements of popular culture possessing a somewhat dissentient quality, it has also been the case that the AKP-oriented pundits in the

media could easily abandon this “anti-elitism.” Contemporary popular figures and cultural products or their historical counterparts that have become a part of the national canon or were recognized as indisputable common values for decades could also meet with antagonism if they are conceived as incompatible with the discourse of native/national/Islamic art. This has been the case with Cem Yılmaz, a hugely popular comedian and film-maker, who despite distancing himself from daily politics cannot avoid being condemned by the Islamists.⁸ Likewise, Kemal Sunal, the late comedian who starred in several low-brow comedies and social satires through the end of his career, became the target of a recent desecration—reversing Bourdieu’s conception of the retrospective consecration of cultural products—by Islamic-conservative critics, probably to neutralize his potential critical symbolism.

Kemal Sunal and his oeuvre of films are recently being criticized for not being Islamic enough (the working-class families depicted in these films do not observe religious practices, they consume alcoholic drinks, and so on), but perhaps most importantly, the villains in some of his films are conservative, religious, or pious, yet greedy and corrupt figures, who benefit from feudal or capitalist forms of exploitation regimes, including capitalists, landlords, employers, the bourgeoisie, or straightforward right-wing populist and corrupt politicians.⁹

The depiction of the stock villains of Kemal Sunal’s films is indeed a very sensitive issue, since Islamism in Turkey, after decades of utopian yet unclear anti-capitalist rhetoric, has made peace with capitalism in its most unbridled, neoliberal form once and for all during the AKP governments. Sunal’s films pose a considerable threat since they effortlessly undermine the Islamic rhetoric of victimhood and its understanding of the nation (as poor but pious Muslim “folk”), expose the class formation of the AKP, and, to make matters worse, are available and aired frequently by conservative TV channels since they cost next to nothing (thanks to

inadequate royalty regulations) and guarantee audience ratings. Censoring profanity, obscenity, or scenes with brandy glasses, as these conservative TV channels do when they air Kemal Sunal's films, does not remove the subversive symbolism of these films. What is required is a more programmatic refutation. In this case, the elitist discourse of the highly criticized cultural hegemony, trivializing popular products for being culturally insignificant, being of poor taste, or being "trashy," can be emulated by Islamic-conservative critics without hesitation. In this respect, the populist Islamic-conservative discourse on cultural hegemony is not necessarily against cultural hierarchies, but it is against those who set the hierarchies.

Against the established cultural formation, the Islamist-conservative cultural claim suggests a retreat back to nativist roots. This involves the exaltation of historical legacy, particularly a Turco-Islamic reinterpretation of the Ottoman and Seljuk Empires, and hence the popularization of Turco-Islamic symbols and motifs. The anachronistic and fictitious concept of "Ottoman–Seljuk style" (Batuman, [2018](#): 194) and Ottoman revivalism in urban planning and architecture (public buildings and mosques) is widely criticized by many, including conservative circles.¹⁰ The persistence and prevalence of Turco–Islamic symbols and motifs in public space amounts to symbolic violence (Tutal, [2017](#)). The Seljuk-style octagrams covering every surface from building facades to street furniture, mass transportation vehicles to interior design, official documents to kebab joint decorations, and public restrooms to garbage bins have appeared in urban space as the most explicit manifestations of the AKP's claim to "cultural power."

The other prominent symptom of the Islamic–conservative cultural claim is the substitution of visual arts and plastic arts with traditional arts. The government made strenuous efforts to revitalize traditional arts such as miniatures, calligraphy, marbling art, and gilding (some of which, in fact, are not arts but rather crafts). However, this enterprise has achieved

limited success so far, primarily yielding hobby courses, personal development classes, and workshops held in the classrooms and exhibition halls in town cultural centres run by the government or municipalities. Some Islamist critics discredited these efforts for falling into the trap of culture industry in the guise of traditionalism (Yıldırım, [2018](#): 295–303). Nevertheless, the government continued to allocate increasing financial resources for this goal. In 2018, the Yeditepe Biennial, the first biennial of traditional arts, was held in İstanbul, heavily funded by state funds, public corporations, and those private companies that “succeeded” during the AKP period in closing deals for some critical public procurements and municipality tenders. Although it was discontinued in 2020, the much-boasted event was clearly positioned against the İstanbul Biennial, an international contemporary arts event held by a civil initiative, the İKSV, since the 1980s.

Such bold attempts to transform the field of culture would be unthinkable without the immense mobilization of the financial resources and institutional coordination of several branches of the state bureaucracy, such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, municipalities, and TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation), the national public broadcaster. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism has the legal mandate to control and coordinate the national directorates of the most extensive art companies in Turkey, such as the Turkish state theatres and the State Opera and Ballet. Before interventionist cultural policies gained prominence, the publicly funded status of the state theatres and opera and ballet was a particularly hot debate topic (see Aksoy & Şeyben, [2015](#)). Despite the apprehension in the early periods of the AKP as to the withdrawal of state support from these institutions, they remained public, while their repertory maintained a balance between nationally or internationally acclaimed plays and “native

and national” texts by iconic Islamist playwrights such as Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Nuri Pakdil.

Another agency of the Ministry of Culture, the Film Supporting Board, is also implicated in the AKP’s interventionism. In recent years the board, which consists of representatives of the film industry and ministry bureaucrats, has been criticized for losing its impartiality. Film professionals and critics denounced the board for operating heavily on political criteria and blocking funds to those filmmakers known to be politically distant from the government. The Supporting Board indeed has declined to fund many projects including internationally acclaimed and awarded films such as the Berlin contender *A Tale of Three Sisters* (dir. Emin Alper, 2019) and Sundance-awarded *Butterflies* (dir. Tolga Karaçelik, 2018). The filmmakers claimed that they were rejected not because of the “politically harmless” films themselves, but because of their dissident reputations, and particularly their support for “academics for peace,” an initiative to demand a restarting of the “peace process” between the state and the PKK, which was punished by draconian State of Emergency decrees.¹¹

In the 1990s, municipalities became the springboard to national power for the Islamist line of parties, including the AKP. Until the 2019 local elections, most of the metropolitan municipalities including İstanbul and Ankara were under the control of the AKP’s or its preceding Islamist parties’ mayors for roughly a quarter century. Municipalities play a strategic role in the struggle with their immediate effect on cultural agendas through locally run cultural centres (generally multipurpose structures that can host conferences and stage art performances or art exhibitions) and other cultural organizations such as public concerts and recreational events. The costs of these organizations, the selection of the commissioned performers (who is favoured, who is banned), and their paycheques are constant subjects of discussion in terms of

clientelism and penalization of dissidents. A politically favoured performer in this context does not necessarily need to be a party member but known to speak in praise of the ruling party and its leader. A dissident, by the same account, could be almost anyone, including non-partisans, as long as they have publicly criticized government policies at some point.¹²

Many “city theatres” run by municipalities in metropolises have formed exclusive repertoires of Islamist or right-wing writers. Up until the 2019 elections, the Başkent Theatre run by the Ankara Municipality funded and organized some Islamist-nationalist agitprop plays, such as a piece on the Turkish Armed Forces’ operation in northern Syria (Malazgirtten Afrin’e) and a play depicting the civil resistance to the 2016 coup attempt (Karanlığa Karşı Direniş), which were hastily written to meet the exigent political and ideological needs of the government. After losing the three largest metropolitan municipalities of İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir to the opposition in 2019 local elections, the AKP lost this formidable instrument of seeking “cultural power” as well as a large market for its partisan performers.

Always having served as a mouthpiece for the government in power, the national broadcaster TRT with its several television and radio channels addressing both popular and high-brow taste has also been a useful instrument in implementing cultural policies. In terms of popular culture, TRT offers very popular historical dramas such as *Payitaht: Abdülhamid*, about the late Ottoman sultan who is a revered figure in the Turkish–Islamic movement. The double-layered stories of the series at once boost nostalgic neo-Ottomanist and Islamic sentiments and address actual events to serve the day-to-day needs of the current political power (Özçetin, [2019](#)). It also imposes an analogy between the turn-of-the-century monarch Abdülhamid and today’s president, Erdoğan. Historical dramas, particularly historical action dramas with their

trademark swords and shields, attract many devoted viewers, but are also criticized by many, including conservative writers.

Regarding art and culture, TRT has followed the general blueprints of the AKP cultural policies. Before the interventionist policies took effect, in 2010–2011, TRT gave up its thematic TV channel and radio stations on culture and arts. TRT2, the thematic culture and art channel, became TRT Haber, a news channel. Soon after that, the range of FM Radio 3, a thematic channel dedicated to classical music, jazz, and Western pop music genres, was limited to metropolitan cities only.¹³ The shutdown of TRT2 and the allocating of Radio 3's transmitters to other thematic TRT radio channels broadcasting Turkish traditional and folk music was in line with a policy to limit governmental funds for “promoting Western culture,” or its liberal apology, “the withdrawal of the state from culture and arts.” However, in 2019, TRT relaunched its culture- and art-themed TRT2, which now promises to broadcast “Hollywood films as well as distinguished examples of World cinema and festival films,” and to cover all art disciplines “from traditional to contemporary art, from traditional Turkish street theatre to opera and ballet.”¹⁴

“Cultural clash”: myth or reality?

As has been the case for the analysis of many other thorny issues during the AKP period, many scholars and journalists assessed the AKP's and Islamists' claim for power from the lenses of the “center/periphery” paradigm. This paradigm is a grand narrative that explains the structure and transformation of Turkish society as a perpetual cleavage and confrontation between a modernizing military–bureaucratic center and a heterogeneous mass on the periphery. Originally, the framework was developed by Shils to understand the dual structure of societies. Shils ([1975](#))

suggested that each society has a centre that holds together a complex network of institutions (political, economic, and cultural) and a periphery that struggles to integrate with the center, causing social problems. After Mardin's seminal article ([1973](#)), in which he explored the explanatory power of the center/periphery duality for Turkish politics, the framework received vast attention from social scientists as well as politicians. Briefly, the approach suggests that Turkey has a periphery that has been excluded from the institutions held together by the state as well as the privilege and cultural codes that come with it (Bakiner, [2018](#)). In Shils's formulation, the tension between centre and periphery is not everlasting; the center finds mechanisms to integrate with the periphery. Mardin, on the other hand, argued that while the Ottoman state managed to claim political and economic control of the periphery, it failed to do so in the realm of culture. As a result, unlike in Western societies, Turkey inherited a centre composed of the new generations of modernizing elites, who distinguished themselves from the periphery. The periphery responded to this cultural gap by holding onto religious values. According to Mardin, this fundamental tension reproduced itself despite major political transformations that took place since the late Ottoman period ([1973](#)). However, a new critical group of scholars recently challenged this dualistic view. For instance, Lord, , focused on the role of the *Diyanet* (Presidency of Religious Affairs) and showed how such clear-cut opposition fails to represent the historical transformation of the institutions accurately (2018).. Despite such recent criticisms regarding its explanatory power, the centre/periphery approach has been considered a key to understanding politics from late Ottoman to twenty-first-century Turkey.

The main tenets of this approach informed a number of studies discussing the AKP's electoral rise and its capacity to mobilize masses (e.g. Yavuz, [2006](#); Cizre, [2008](#)). In fact, the interest shown in Mardin's article increased dramatically after 2001, "at the height of the tension

between the ruling AKP and a coalition of self-designated Kemalist judges, prosecutors, military officers, and civilian politicians” (Bakiner, [2018](#): 7). For many, the AKP was/is associated with the periphery, primarily due to the assumptions regarding their main voter profile: religious–conservative and of low socioeconomic status. Also, the reaction of institutions that make up the secular core of the Turkish state, such as the military and judiciary, to the rise of the AKP was/is seen as proof of Erdoğan’s position as the mobilizer of the periphery. Despite Mardin’s reluctance to attribute a positive value to the periphery, the rise of what the AKP and some other liberal circles called “democratic conservatism” at the time, considered as the revenge of the oppressed, was thus a progressive development.

The major premises of this centre/periphery paradigm cast their shadows on the studies that have examined the ways in which the increasing economic resources and political appeal of Islamism throughout the 1990s resonated with the increasing visibility of Islamic and conservative cultural patterns in urban space. These studies turned their attention to such new styles of consumption as five-star hotels with women-only beaches or fashionable veiling brands and magazines, treating them as by-products of the accumulation of capital by the conservative segments of society (Göle, [1999](#); Navaro-Yashin, [2002](#); Saktanber, [2002](#); White, [1999](#), [2002](#)). However, this literature also acknowledges that the economic upward mobility and the motivation to “upgrade” cultural habits did not necessarily carry the periphery to the centre. As Sandıkçı and Ger ([2007](#)) suggest, the secular media’s emphasis on conservatives’ lack of taste increases the latter’s concern with taste, resulting in an ongoing struggle over recognition.

One can also see the traces of this dualistic centre/periphery perspective in more recent studies that utilize such concepts as *Kulturkampf* and/or “polarization” in their attempt to explain the transformation of the cultural field during the AKP period. Originally, the concept

Kulturkampf emerged to explain the power struggle between the church and the Kingdom of Prussia over the control of educational institutions in the nineteenth-century. The term, however, is used by extension to refer to the ongoing tension between democratic states and religious institutions, and more generally between the conservative cultural milieu and the secular one. Most recently, “culture wars” was used by Hunter (1991) to explain how America was demarcated between the “orthodox” and “progressive” camps, both offering alternative moral frameworks for people as they pick their positions on controversial issues ranging from abortion to gun control. Since then, various empirical studies have explored to what extent “culture wars” have explanatory power over the American cultural and political sphere (e.g. DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996). Empirical studies aiming to understand Turkish society from the lenses of this framework have reached different and often conflicting conclusions. Kaya and Sunar (2015), for example, showed that the polarization of social and political attitudes is only limited to certain topics, while the responses given to most issues suggest that a dual structure has no empirical basis. On the other hand, analysing voting preferences, Kalaycıoğlu (2012: 7) suggested the existence of a *Kulturkampf* “deeply dividing along cultural lines into two large communities.” In a similar vein, Akçaoğlu (2018) suggested that the culture war is the main characteristic of this nation’s collective unconscious. As Kaya and Sunar’s review (2015) demonstrated, the tensions between Muslim and Western, secular and religious, and modern and conservative have been considered as the prime character of Turkish society by many other academics and politicians (e.g. Baran, 2008, 2010; Kuru, 2009; Cornell and Karaveli, 2008; Yavuz, 2009). Akçaoğlu (2018) argued that no matter who the winner of the culture war is, the main concern has always been determining whether the content of cultural currency is secular or conservative. Such an argument assumes the existence of two camps whose power of legitimation on the cultural field

changes in relation to the political field. However, Akçaoğlu (2018), with his much more refined approach to culture, also acknowledged its complex and multilayered nature. He argued that while the AKP managed to establish its hegemony over certain cultural fields such as education (e.g. expansion of religious vocational high schools), media (e.g. consolidation of pro-government TV channels), and urban architecture (e.g. decline in the number of studio apartments), it failed to do so for visual and audio culture.

The arguments revolving around such concepts as *Kulturkampf* and polarization conceive the AKP's recent cultural strategy as a manifestation of a long-standing political and cultural clash between the conservative, pious majority on the one hand and the secularist and Westernist minority on the other, haunting the entire history of modern Turkey (Kaya, 2012: 4; Birkiye, 2009; Gögüs and Mannitz, 2016). By designating the recent contestation over culture as an incarnation of a historically rooted tension between two camps, these approaches cannot adequately concede its "historically specific" aspects. The Islamist intellectuals' recent quest for transforming the cultural field takes place in a context where an Islamist-conservative party controls the economic resources as well as the legal and ideological apparatuses of the state. As such, the Islamists' recent attempts to "reclaim" the field of culture cannot be seen simply as a manifestation of an erstwhile sociocultural clash. Rather, the trajectory of the political struggles and rapidly changing balances of power under AKP rule, as stated in earlier sections of this chapter, moulds the timing, objectives, and forms in which this "cultural struggle" takes place (Shukri and Hossain, 2017).

The arguments predicated on the notion of polarization and *Kulturkampf* also carry the risk of inadvertently reproducing the very foundational presuppositions that the AKP and its affiliated intellectuals have used to justify their cultural interventionism. AKP officials and the

organic intellectuals affiliated with this party depict a simplistic picture of Turkish society in which two monolithic and antagonistic sections of society historically collide with each other. The construction of an exalted image of a “pure,” morally worthy, and repressed population and its native culture is reliant upon a crude representation of its polar opposite, that is, degenerated, immoral, imperious intellectuals and their alien culture. In fact, not only the AKP but also virtually all right-wing political movements preceding it appealed to a self-victimizing rhetoric representing conservatives as being historically oppressed by Westernist elites throughout modern Turkish history (Açıkel, [1996](#)). Nevertheless, it was in the AKP period that this rhetoric was utilized in a full-fledged manner not only to aspire but also to expand power and not only to denounce but also to sideline opponents.

Despite not attaching such normative traits to the two poles and not necessarily reaching the same conclusions as Islamists, the scholarly arguments revolving around the notion of polarization and *Kulturkampf* also rest on a vision of Turkey divided into two monolithic social entities, with mutually exclusive visions and interests. It is true that the AKP’s monopoly over state power and its Islamist–nationalist rhetoric and policies alienated large sections of society from the political establishment, induced them to act in a united fashion at critical political junctures, and led its political opponents to form alliances, especially in elections and public referendums (Aydın-Düzgit and Balta, 2018). By the same token, the electoral support base of the AKP was further consolidated and ossified in due process as they were challenged by a fierce opposition, especially during and in the aftermath of the Gezi uprising (Keyman, [2014](#)). However, this context-dependent and contingent political reconfiguration does not necessarily translate into the formation of two monolithic “cultural blocs.”

Neither the opponents nor the supporters of the AKP's hegemonic project are immune to internal fragmentations and strife and capable of building and representing a coherent cultural vision and taste. In modern Turkish history the wide array of opponents of the Islamist-nationalist project of the AKP, such as socialists, secularists, Kemalists, and the supporters of the Kurdish movement, could never form an agreed-upon cultural or artistic school of thought, coherent standards to assess the aesthetic value of an artistic product, and hence a consistent sociocultural outlook to juxtapose themselves as a united bloc against the Islamist vision of culture. As such, the "secularist cultural bloc" against the authentic and native Islamic-conservative culture needs to be conceived not as a fact, as a social and political subject/agent, but rather as an ideological/political construction. As such, it would be misleading to utilize "secularist/leftist culture" as a category of analysis "in a reifying way that posits its presence as a substantial bounded entity" (Sturm and Bauch, [2010](#): 189). Rather, it needs to be treated as a "category of practice" through which certain ideological and political projects are legitimized and pursued (Brubaker, [2013](#)).

Assuming that Islamist and/or conservative intellectuals, pundits, and artists who strive to contribute to the AKP's quest for cultural hegemony form a "coherent cultural bloc" is equally misleading. Although there is a convergence among Islamist and conservative circles on the idea that a secular, materialist, and non-native practice of art dominates the field of culture in Turkey, they do not seem to reach a robust agreement on the markers of their own "cultural identity." Despite the fact that the significance and pertinence of endorsing a "native and national" art is virtually a leitmotif used by those Islamic-conservative writers, one cannot discern from their writings a coherent conception of the specific aesthetic principles demarcating the borders of "nativeness." As such, the quest for "native and national art" and the discussions revolving

around “cultural power” do not generate a distinct aesthetic/artistic genre on the part of Islamist circles, remaining limited to the reproduction of the image of the opponents of the AKP project as a cultural enemy. On top of this, some Islamist-nationalist writers go so far as to see state (AKP)-orchestrated endeavours to intervene purposefully in the field of culture as futile attempts to break the hegemony of “secularist elites.” Some well-known Islamist columnists such as Yusuf Kaplan, Celal Fedai, and Orhan Gazi Gökçe, albeit from different angles, have criticized the AKP’s quest for transforming the field of culture as a form of “social engineering” that recalls the Kemalists’ “patronizing” gaze on art and culture and their will to power in the early Republican period (Sezer, [2019](#): 22–30). Moreover, some actions of the AKP cast doubt on this ambitious programme of Islamic cultural hegemony and caught the conservative intellectuals who are not immediately linked with party circles on the wrong foot. The expropriation of one of the oldest conservative/Islamic NGOs in the field of culture and arts, the Foundation for Sciences and Arts, and the private Şehir University run by this foundation is one of many indicators of the fact that the AKP’s struggle to hold exclusive political and economic power doubtlessly outranks the efforts to create conservative/Islamic culture and art. Many Islamic public figures have protested, if only in a low-key manner, the expropriation of this once respected foundation.

Conclusion

The AKP’s recently intensifying endeavours to dominate the sphere of art and culture by mobilizing the economic resources and political and ideological apparatuses of the state is yet another aspect of this party’s quest for entrenching its Islamist-nationalist hegemonic project. This attempt has also shown the tendency of the AKP leadership and affiliated Islamist and nationalist pundits and artists to sideline, delegitimize, or, at best, co-opt those expressions of

culture incompatible with this hegemonic project. The debates sparked by Islamist and conservative circles revolving around the concepts of “cultural power” and “cultural hegemony” generated discourses and tropes justifying this hegemonic strategy. In these discussions, the core assumption was that the field of culture in Turkey has long been dominated by Kemalists, secularists, and leftists who acted in unison to impose, from the top down, an “alien” Westernist cultural orientation on the pious masses. As such, a new cultural policy like the one that the AKP pursues is necessary and legitimate, according to these writers, to ensure that hitherto submerged and dismissed “native” art and culture can take to the stage and thrive. The tendency of some analysts and scholars to see this hegemonic strategy as another manifestation of a fruitless “culture war” and “polarization” between the conservative and secularist sections of society is problematic and misleading in two respects. First of all, these dualistic interpretations stemming from the centre/periphery paradigm cannot adequately contextualize the AKP’s and Islamist and nationalist circles’ endeavours to transform the field of culture within the specific trajectory and dynamics of power struggles during the AKP period. Secondly, they carry the risk of reproducing the misleading depiction of Turkish society as consisting of two mutually exclusive camps, an ideological construction on the basis of which the AKP and Islamist nationalist intellectuals legitimize and carry out their quest for dominating the field of culture. In this vein, what is needed is a perspective that would situate the AKP’s cultural policies and its discourse of “cultural power” within the context of this party’s shifting political and ideological strategies to entrench its hegemony and vanquish real or potential political opponents.

Works Cited

- Açikel, F. (1996). "Kutsal Mazlumluğun Psikopatolojisi," *Toplum ve Bilim* 70: 153–198.
- Akçaoğlu, A. (2018). "Kültürün İktidarla Düğümlenişi ve Türkiye'deki Manzara," *Birikim* 347: 6–13.
- Aksoy, A., and Şeyben, B. Y. (2015). "Storm over the State Cultural Institutions: New Cultural Policy Direction in Turkey," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21(2): 183–199, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2014.890605
- Atasoy, Y. (2009). *Islam's Marriage with Neoliberalism: State Transformation in Turkey*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Aydın-Düzgüt, S., and Balta, E. (2018). "When Elites Polarize Over Polarization: Framing the Polarization Debate in Turkey," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 59: 109–133.
- Aytekin, E. A. (2017). "A 'Magic and Poetic' Moment of Dissensus: Aesthetics and Politics in the June 2013 (Gezi Park) Protests in Turkey." *Space and Culture* 20(2): 191–208.
- Bakiner, O. (2018). "A Key to Turkish Politics? The Center–Periphery Framework Revisited," *Turkish Studies* 19(4): 503–522.
- Baran, Z. (2008). "Turkey Divided." *Journal of Democracy* 19(1): 55–69.
- Baran, Z. (2010). *Torn Country: Turkey between Secularism and Islamism*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.
- Batuman, B. (2018). *New Islamist Architecture and Urbanism: Negotiating Nation and Islam through Built Environment in Turkey*. New York: Routledge.
- Birkiye, S. K. (2009). "Changes in the Cultural Policies of Turkey and the AKP's Impact on Social Engineering and Theatre," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(3): 261–274. DOI: 10.1080/10286630902856713

- Bora, T. (2018). "Kültürel iktidar tartışmaları: Kültürle kahretmek," *Birikim* 347: 54–64.
- Brubaker, R. (2013). "Categories of Analysis and Categories of Practice: A Note on the Study of Muslims in European Countries of Immigration." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(1): 1–8.
- Brubaker, R. (2020). Populism and Nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism* 26(1): 44–66.
- Çınar, M. (2018). "Turkey's 'Western' or 'Muslim' Identity and the AKP's Civilizational Discourse," *Turkish Studies* 19(2): 176–197.
- Cizre, Ü. (Ed.) (2008). *Secular and Islamic politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*. New York: Routledge.
- Cornell, S. E., and Karaveli, H. M. (2008). *Prospects for a "Torn" Turkey: A Secular and Unitary Future?* Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute.
- Coşar, S., and Özman A. (2004) "Centre-Right Politics in Turkey after the November 2002 General Election: Neo-Liberalism with a Muslim Face." *Contemporary Politics* 10(1): 57–74.
- Demir, S. T. (2017). "Kaplanoğlu, Cumbul ve muhafazakarlığın 'Sol'u," *Star Açık Görüş* October 7.
- DiMaggio, P., J. Evans, and B. Bryson. (1996). "Have Americans' Social Attitudes become More Polarized?," *American Journal of Sociology* 102(3): 690–755.
- Ferguson, M. (2014). "White Turks, Black Turks and Negroes: The Politics of Polarization," in Ozkirimli, U. (Ed.) *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey: #occupygezi*. London: Palgrave Pivot, 77–88.
- Gögüs, I., and Mannitz, S. (2016). "The World Culture Entered Turkey: New Conflict Lines and the Challenges for Democratic Consolidation in Turkey." *PRIF Reports*, 139. Frankfurt

am Main: Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-46689-3>

- Göle, N. (1999). *İslamın yeni kamusal yüzleri*. İstanbul: Metis.
- Hazır, A. (2019). “Narratives on Religion-State Relations in Turkey: Continuities and Discontinuities,” *Turkish Studies*, 1–21. DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2019.1685881
- Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture Wars*. New York: Basic Books
- Kalaycıoğlu, E. (2012). “Kulturkampf in Turkey: The Constitutional Referendum of 12 September 2010,” *South European Society and Politics* 17(1): 1–22.
- Kaya, I. (2012). “Conceptualizing the Current Clashes between Modernist Republicans and Islamic Conservatives in Turkey,” *Social Science Information* 51(1): 3–21.
- Kaya, Y., and Sunar, L. (2015). “The Culture Wars Redux? The Polarization of Social and Political Attitudes in Turkey,” *Social Currents* 2(4): 393–412.
- Keten, E. T. (2018). “Yabancı, Elit, Cahil,” *Birikim* 347: 72–78.
- Keyman, E. F. (2014). “The AK Party: Dominant Party, New Turkey and Polarization,” *Insight Turkey* 16(2): 19–31.
- Kuru, A. T. (2009). *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lord, C. (2018). *Religious Politics in Turkey: From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mardin, Ş. (1973). “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?,” *Daedalus*, 102(1): 169–190.
- Mert, N. (2007). *Merkez Sağın Kısa Tarihi*. İstanbul: Selis Kitap.
- Mudde, C. (2004). “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 541–563.

- Navaro-Yashin, Y. (2002). *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Özçetin, B. (2019). “‘The Show of the People’ against the Cultural Elites: Populism, Media and Popular Culture in Turkey,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(5-6), 942-957.
- Saktanber, A. (2002). “‘We Pray Like You Have Fun’: New Islamic Youth in Turkey between Intellectualism and Popular Culture,” in Kandiyoti, D., Saktanber, A. (Eds.), *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 254–276.
- Sandıkçı, Ö., and Ger, G. (2007). “Constructing and Representing the Islamic Consumer in Turkey,” *Fashion Theory* 11(2): 189–210.
- Saraçoğlu, C., and Demirkol, Ö. (2015). “Nationalism and Foreign Policy Discourse in Turkey Under the AKP Rule,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42(3): 301–319.
- Şen, M. (2010). “Transformation of Turkish Islamism and the Rise of the Justice and Development Party,” *Turkish Studies* 11(1): 59–84.
- Sezer, B. (2019). “Türkiye’de Kültürel İktidar Tartışmaları: Cins Dergisi Üzerinden Bir Değerlendirme,” Unpublished MA thesis (Ankara University).
- Shils, E. (1975). *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shukri, S. F. M., and Hossain, I. (2017). “Strategic Shifts in Discourse by the AKP in Turkey, 2002–2015,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 28(3): 5–26.
- Sturm, T., and Bauch, N. (2010). Nationalism and Geography: An Interview with Rogers Brubaker, *Geopolitics* 15(1): 185–196.

- Taş, T., and Taş O. (2014). “Resistance on the Walls, Reclaiming Public Space: Street Art in Times of Political Turmoil in Turkey,” *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 5(3): 327–349.
- Taşkın, Y. (2008) “AKP’s Move to ‘Conquer’ the Center-Right: Its Prospects and Possible Impacts on the Democratization Process,” *Turkish Studies* 9(1): 53–72.
- Tutal, N. (2017). “Pro patria mori et obsequium,” *Varlık*, 9/2017.
- Vieten, U. (2018). “Ambivalences of Cosmopolitanisms, Elites and Far Right Populisms in Twenty First Century Europe,” *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy* 2: 101–118.
- Vieten, U., and Poynting, S. (2016). “Contemporary Far-Right Racist Populism in Europe,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 37(6): 533–540.
- White, J. (1999). “Islamic Chic,” in Keyder, C. (Ed.) *Istanbul: Between the Global and Local*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 77–91.
- White, J. (2002). *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Yavuz, M. H. (Ed.) (2006). *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Islam, Democracy, and the AK Parti*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Yavuz, M. H. (2009). *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Yıldırım, E. (2018). *Türkiye’nin Yeni Kültürü*. Istanbul: Pınar yay.
- Yılmaz, Z. (2017). “The AKP and the Spirit of the ‘New’ Turkey: Imagined Victim, Reactionary Mood, and Resentful Sovereign.” *Turkish Studies* 18(3): 482–513.

¹ This work is based on a research project (No. 218K152 – “The Transformation of the Fields of Art in Turkey: Cultural Distinction and Conservative Taste”) funded by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK).

² Hakan Arslanbenzer (2017), *Kültürel İktidar Solda mı? [Does the cultural power belong to the Left?]*. İstanbul: Avangard Yay.

³ “Today, in Turkey, the terms ‘art’ and ‘artist’ remind one of people who would join ‘Pro-republic demonstrations,’ who have the base character to open banners calling the army to duty, who are politically inclined to a neither-fish-nor-fowl category of ‘Kemalist-left’ and a political stance which can be summed up as ‘let this government be gone, no matter how it happens.’” Özlem Albayrak, “Dindarlardan Neden Sanatçı Çıkmaz?” *Yeni Şafak*, May 8, 2012. www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ozlemalbayrak/dindarlardan-neden-sanatci-cikmaz-32304.

⁴ “Devlet Eliyle Tiyatro Olmaz,” *Hürriyet*, April 30, 2012. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: “I ask you, who the hell are you? Is theatre in this country your monopoly? Is art in this country your monopoly? Are you the only people who are licensed to comment on art? Those days are over. The days are over when you could wave your despotic enlightened finger to belittle and scold the nation” (as cited by Nilgün Tatal, “The Struggle for Cultural Power in Turkey,” *Eurozine*, October 25, 2017. www.eurozine.com/pro-patria-mori-and-obsequium/#footnote-10).

⁵ Erdoğan’s aforementioned speech continues as follows: “Today there are many useful tools to shape future generations, but the most important factor is the dedicated servants who will turn this ambition into service [...] Curriculums that were prepared with an animosity-

filled approach to our ancestors and culture in many fields, from our language to our history, have been changed [by the government]. In many places—from the media to the cinema, from science to technology and law—there are still people with minds that are foreign to the nation in the most effective places.” *Hürriyet Daily News*, “We Still Have Problems in Social and Cultural Rule: President Erdoğan,” May 28, 2017.

www.hurriyetdailynews.com/we-still-have-problems-in-social-and-cultural-rule-president-erdogan-113644.

⁶ Oğuzhan Bilgin, “Cultural Hegemony in Turkey,” *Daily Sabah*, November 15, 2018.

www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2018/11/15/cultural-hegemony-in-turkey.

⁷ “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan’ın Yeditepe Bienali Açılışından Yansıyan Kareleri,” *Sabah*, April 2, 2018. www.sabah.com.tr/galeri/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdoganin-yeditepe-bienali-acilisindan-yansiyan-kareleri/8. “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, tepeden inmece, baskıcı, jakoben anlayışın bugün de bazı sanat çevrelerinde devam ettiğine şahit olduklarını” vurguladı.

⁸ “AK Parti’den komedyen Cem Yılmaz’a sert tepki: Kimse senden para istemiyor,” *Yeni Akiti*,

December 10, 2019. www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/ak-partiden-komedyen-cem-yilmaza-sert-tepki-kimse-senden-para-istemiyor-943083.html.

⁹ www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/islama-en-buyuk-zarari-kemal-sunal-verdi-191144.html.

¹⁰ Dücane Cündioğlu, “Çamlıca İçin Yakarış,” *Yeni Şafak*, November 22, 2012.

www.yenisafak.com/aktuel/camllica-icin-yakarisi-425453. In this newspaper column, “An Outcry for Çamlıca,” conservative thinker Cündioğlu protests the Çamlıca mosque project for its excessive size, vanity, and imitative style.

¹¹ www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/film-cekmemizi-istemiyorlar-671680.

¹²www.sabah.com.tr/magazin/2016/08/11/silanin-konserleri-iptal-edildi.

¹³www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/trt-klasik-muzikten-sogudu-1461482.

¹⁴www.trthaber.com/haber/kultur-sanat/trt-2-yayin-hayatina-basladi-406074.html.