THE J-CURVE MODEL: AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING COLLECTIVE DISCONTENT IN TURKEY*

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary world is marked by deep collective discontent that is difficult to define. Various theories have been put forward to explain collective discontent. One of them is Davies's J-curve model. According to this model, collective discontent is most likely to occur when a prolonged period of economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal. The present study aims to explain widespread and deepening collective discontent in Turkey with the J-curve model by associating it with the social and political conditions of the country. The data used in the study were obtained from the Turkish Statistical Institute. In the present study, data on gross national income per capita, cost of living, number of suicides, and unemployment rates between 2002 and 2021 were analyzed. All data clearly show that the period of 2002-2021 is graphically compatible with the J-curve. Accordingly, significant economic and social progress took place in Turkey between 2002 and 2012/2013. Since 2012/2013, this progress left its place to regression. The J-curve model has only been studied in an industrial context in Turkey. This study is the first to evaluate the J-curve model in relation to social and political events.

Keywords: J-Curve, Davies, Turkey, Collective Discontent, Relative Deprivation.

J-EĞRİSİ MODELİ: TÜRKİYE'DEKİ KOLLEKTİF HOŞNUTSUZLUĞU ANLAMAK İÇİN ALTERNATİF BİR YOL

ÖZ

Günümüz dünyası tanımlanması zor, derin bir kolektif huzursuzluk içerisindedir. Kollektif huzursuzluğu açıklamak için çeşitli teoriler ileri sürülmüştür. Bunlardan biri de Davies'in J-eğrisi modelidir. Bu modele göre, uzun süreli ekonomik ve sosyal gelişmenin ardından ortaya çıkan keskin gerileme veya düşüş kollektif hoşnutsuzluğa yol açmaktadır. Elinizdeki bu çalışma Türkiye'de son zamanlarda yaygınlaşan ve derinleşen kolektif hoşnutsuzluğu, ülkenin içinde bulunduğu sosyal ve siyasal koşullarla da ilişkilendirerek J eğrisi modeliyle açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Çalışmada kullanılan veriler Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu'ndan alınmıştır. Çalışmada, 2002-2021 yılları arasındaki kişi başına düşen gayri safi milli gelir, yaşam maliyeti, intihar sayısı ve işsizlik oranlarına ilişkin veriler analiz edilmiştir. Bütün veriler, 2002-2021 döneminin grafiksel olarak J eğrisi ile uyumlu olduğunu açıkça göstermektedir. Buna göre, 2002 ile 2012/2013 yılları arasında Türkiye'de önemli bir ekonomik ve sosyal ilerleme gerçekleşmiştir. 2012/2013 sonrasında ise bu ilerleme yerini gerilemeye bırakmıştır. J eğrisi modeli Türkiye'de yalnızca endüstriyel bağlamda çalışılmıştır. Elinizdeki bu çalışma J eğrisi modelini sosyal ve politik olaylarla bağlantılı olarak değerlendirmesi bakımından ilk niteliğine sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: J-eğrisi, Davies, Türkiye, Kollektif Hoşnutsuzluk, Göreli Yoksunluk.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of the study is the collective discontent, which has recently become widespread and deepened in Turkey. The study's primary purpose is to explain the reasons for

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this widespread and deepening social discontent in Turkey with a scientific theory. In this direction, we made use of the J-curve model. This model, which was put forward to explain social discontent in Europe and America, may also explain Turkey's recent social discontent. According to the J-curve model, a sharp decline following economic and social development leads to social discontent. Based on the J-curve model, we set 2002 as the starting point, because Turkey, which was in bad economic conditions in and before 2002, has been in a significant economic and social development after 2002. However, this progress has been replaced by a regression since 2013. The regression following this progress also revealed discontent, which constitutes the main problem of this study. By explaining the social discontent in Turkey with the J-curve model, this study can provide an alternative perspective for both society and government planners, which creates the social context of the study. The study was designed as qualitative research. The data were obtained by document analysis method. The ready data collected from the Turkish Statistical Institute has been interpreted. Specifically, the data on gross national income per capita, cost of living, number of suicides, and unemployment rates were analyzed because this statistical data are indicators that roughly reflect the popular mood of society (Davies 1962).

J-Curve Model

The contemporary world is experiencing a widespread feeling of deep social discontent that is difficult to define. Definitions of such collective discontent are problematic because different classifications may be possible depending on the type and degree of discontent. However, regardless of the degree and type, this "collective discontent," as Gurr (1970: 129) wrote, "is the necessary precondition for civil strife; the greater the intensity and scope of discontent in a population, the greater the magnitude of strife."

There are many recognized forms of collective discontent, including "revolution," "rebellion," "insurrections," "unrest," and "uprisings." According to Gurr (1970: 5), the properties and processes that distinguish them from each other are substantively and theoretically interesting, but at a general level of analysis, they seem to be differences of degree, not kind. Similarly, Pettee (1938: 15) pointed out that revolution, as one of many forms of civil strife, has functionally equivalent counterparts and that revolution is the most wasteful, costly, and final choice among those forms. Peter Calvert (1970: 15) offered a more nuanced explanation, noting that "revolution may be understood…as referring to events in which physical force has actually been used successfully to overthrow a government or regime. Where

such movements have not been successful, they are referred to, according to context, as 'rebellions', 'revolts', 'insurrections' or 'uprisings'.

The examination of those special conditions and processes provides a partial understanding, but for a deeper explanation, according to Gurr (1968b: 249), "we require a more general theory, one capable of accounting for the common elements of that much larger class of events called civil strife." The theory of relative deprivation provides a reasonable basis for this.

Discontent is a psychological variable that is difficult to measure, but there are a few common conditions that can elicit it. The social origin of this discontent is most commonly conceptualized as "relative deprivation." Gurr argued that the collective discontent at the root of civilian violence stems from relative deprivation (de Gaay Fortman 2005).

Gurr (1968a: 1104) further defined relative deprivation as actors' perceptions of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities. "Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are justifiably entitled. The referents of value capabilities are to be found largely in the social and physical environment: They are conditions that determine people's perceived chances of getting or keeping the values they legitimately expect to attain" (Gurr 1968b: 252-253).

Perceived discrepancies between expectations and capabilities with respect to any collectively sought value, be it an economic, psychological, or political value, constitute relative deprivation (Gurr et al. 1976). Gurr (1970) divided relative deprivation into three categories. In decremental deprivation, a group's value expectations remain relatively constant but value capabilities are perceived to decline; in aspirational deprivation, capabilities remain relatively static while expectations increase or intensify; and in progressive deprivation, there is a substantial and simultaneous increase in expectations and decrease in capabilities (Figure 1). All three relative deprivation patterns show that the greater the discrepancy is between expectations and capabilities, the greater the discontent is.
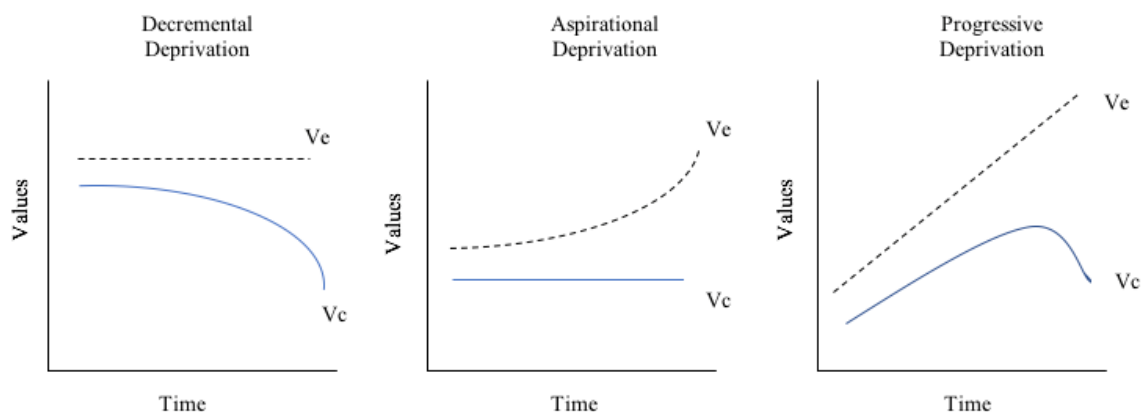
Figure 1. Gurr's models of relative deprivation (Ve: value expectations; Vc: value capabilities). Source: Gurr, Ted Robert (1970), *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton University Press, 47-53.

Indeed, using data on civil strife for 1961-1965, Gurr (1970) statistically analyzed the extent, types, and causes of protest and rebellion in 21 western nations. He used relative deprivation to explain civil strife and concluded that discontent in western societies seems to be a manifestation of relative deprivation, and more specifically immediate economic dissatisfaction. However, some studies have yielded results exactly the opposite. For example, Miller et al. (1977) applied Gurr's relative deprivation to the black urban riots of the late 1960s and concluded that the theory of relative deprivation did not provide a valid explanation for those riots.

Gurr's theory of relative deprivation, and especially progressive deprivation, offers essential insight in understanding the collective discontent that underlies civil strife. Progressive deprivation is a generalized version of the J-curve model proposed by Davies. The connection between the theory of relative deprivation and the J-curve has been the subject of discussion in many studies (Geschwender 1964; Kimmel 1990), but Miller et al. (1977) expressed this most clearly. As stated by Miller et al., the progressive variety of relative deprivation is most commonly referred to as the "J-curve."

The J-curve model arose from Davies' efforts to reconcile Marx with Tocqueville (Miller et al. 1977). According to Davies, Marx and Tocqueville came to diametrically opposed conclusions about the causes of the revolution that constituted the radical form of social discontent. Marx said that social revolution would occur when the proletariat's poverty increased according to the economic standard of living of the bourgeoisie. Unlike Marx, Tocqueville (and Brinton 1952) said that revolution would occur when conditions improved. In his analysis of how and why the French Revolution arose, Tocqueville (2011) noted that the

French Revolution happened at a time when French citizens were not suffering from a stagnant or weak economy.

Both Marx and Tocqueville highlighted the essential point of the revolutionary process that constitutes the radical form of collective discontent. However, according to Davies, neither Tocqueville's nor Marx's explanation of revolution alone was sufficient to explain the revolutionary situation. Therefore, Davies took a piece of both Tocqueville's and Marx's thoughts on revolution and shaped them into a single entity (Miller et al. 1977: 964-965). Davies first took Tocqueville's idea that revolutions occur after periods of progress, then took Marx's idea that revolutions happen when things get worse, and finally united them into a single theory and thus constructed his own theory of revolution.

According to this new formulation, forms of collective discontent ranging from rebellion to revolution "are most likely to occur when a prolonged period of objective economic and social development is followed by a short period of sharp reversal" (Davies 1962: 6). Accordingly, the most important effect on the minds of people experiencing collective discontent is exerted by the intolerable gap between what they want and what they get (Davies 1962). Because this situation graphically produced a J-shaped curve, Davies called his theory the J-curve. He applied this model to Dorr's Rebellion, the Russian Revolution, and the Egyptian Revolution to support his theory.
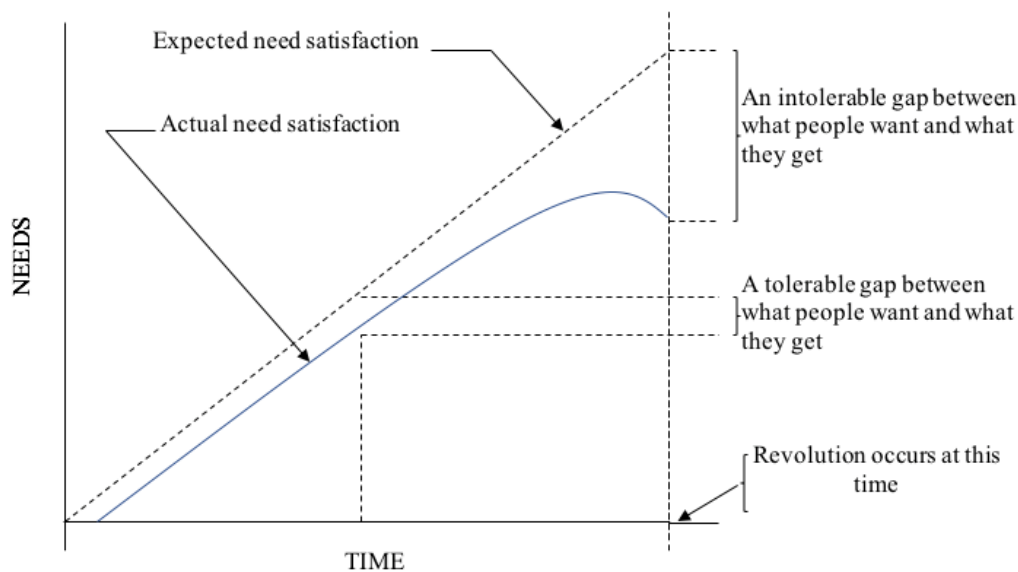

Figure 2. Davies' J-curve model. Source: Davies, James C. (1962), "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1

According to Davies, when a society is generally impoverished or seemingly inevitable evils are patiently endured, revolution does not occur. Humans have lived in dire conditions for centuries, but comparatively few revolutionary situations have arisen (Cohan 1975: 194). In extreme poverty, the individual withdraws from his or her own life, from society, and from any activities that have nothing to do with survival (Davies 1962). The main factor that has brought about revolution is frustration following the increased expectations of people whose conditions had improved (Berkowitz 1968).

Both Davies' J-curve and Gurr's relative deprivation are related to a state of mind. The origin of this state of mind is the gap between expectations and performance, which paves the way for aggressive behavior (Kimmel 1990: 76). Tanter & Midlarsky (1967) largely accepted Davies' findings and applied his model to the Cuban Revolution. According to Tanter & Midlarsky's study (1967), the Cuban Revolution supports the hypothesis that revolutionary intensity is associated with a long-term increase in achievement, followed by a reversal in expectations immediately before the revolution. Feierabend & Feierabend also took advantage of Davies' model, using it to measure political instability. According to Feierabend & Feierabend (1966: 250), "such situations may be typified as those in which levels of social expectations, aspirations, and needs are raised for many people for significant periods of time, and yet remain unmatched by equivalent levels of satisfactions."

According to this formula, the higher (lower) the social want formation in any given society and the lower (higher) the social want satisfaction, the greater (the less) the systemic frustration and the greater (the less) the impulse to political instability (Feierabend & Feierabend 1966: 256-257).

Aims of the Study

Davies' J-curve model emerged in an effort to explain collective discontent in the Americas and Europe in a scientific way (Abeles 1976; Feierabend & Feierabend 1966; Feierabend et al. 1969; Davies 1962; Tanter & Midlarsky 1967). More recent applications of the J-curve include analyses of economic and industrial relations (Bahmani-Oskooee & Ratha 2004; Lal & Lowinger 2002; Kyophilavong et al. 2013; Bahmani-Oskooee & Nasir 2020; Nusair 2017; Bahmani-Oskooee et al. 2019). However, a detailed study has not been conducted in this field in Turkey. Studies applying the J-curve in the Turkish setting have remained very limited, being undertaken in the context of economic and industrial relations (Halicioglu 2008a); Halicioglu 2008b; Akbostancı 2004; Durmaz 2015), while the sociological dimension

has been ignored thus far. A sociological study on the J-curve has not been performed yet in Turkey. Therefore, this study will examine the J-curve from a sociological perspective and evaluate it together with some political events. This study is the first to evaluate the J-curve model by associating it with social and political events in Turkey, unlike previous studies that assessed the J-curve model only in the Turkish industrial context. I see the J-curve model as an essential tool to systematically understand the social discontent in Turkey. In this context, the research questions that I try to answer are as follows:

1- Is the 2002-2021 period graphically compatible with the J-curve model?

2- Are gross national income (GNI) per capita, cost of living, number of suicides, and unemployment rates between 2002 and 2021 compatible with the J-curve model?

Data Collection Method

The study was designed as qualitative research. The data were obtained by document analysis method. I used data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) to examine whether the period between 2002 and 2021 was compatible with the J-curve model. It is accepted that statistical data are indicators that roughly reflect the popular mood of society (Davies 1962). For this reason, I examined TURKSTAT data on GNI per capita, cost of living, number of suicides, and unemployment rates between 2002 and 2021.

Results

Gross National Income per Capita

Data for GNI per capita are presented in Graphic 1. GNI per capita, which was 3,660 USD in 2002 in Turkey, increased steadily until 2008 and reached $10,391. With the exception of a temporary decrease in 2009, the increase continued until 2013. GNI per capita in Turkey reached the highest level in 2013 with $12,519. Since 2013, GNI per capita has steadily dropped.

According to TURKSTAT data, GNI per capita, after having reached $12,519 in 2013, decreased to $8,599 in 2020. Thus, people have been impoverished by 31% since 2013, the year when GNI per capita was highest. According to TURKSTAT reports, GNI per capita has fallen below its 2007 level in Turkey; while it was $9,656 in 2007, it decreased to $8,599 in 2020. When we consider the 2021 predictions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), it seems that the situation will only worsen. According to IMF reports, GNI per capita in Turkey will

decline to $7,568 in 2021. Thus, GNI per capita will have decreased by $4,951 in the last eight years.
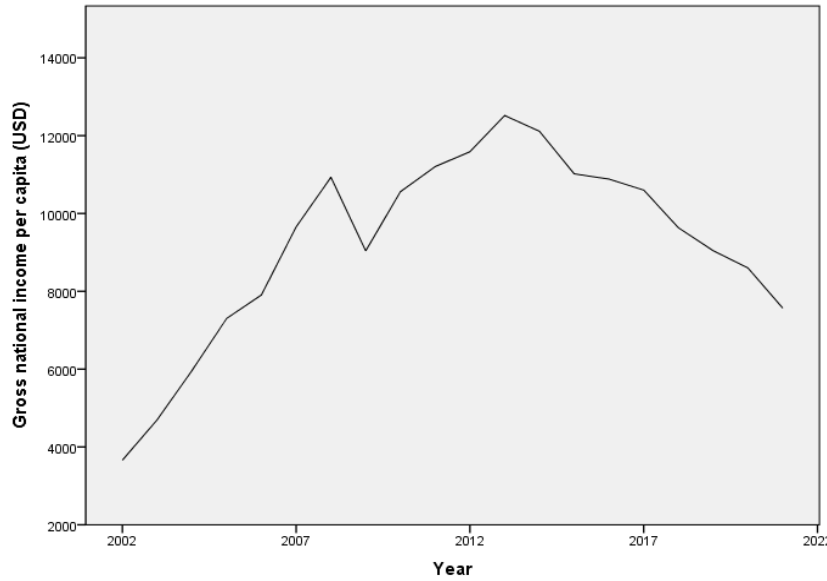
Graphic 1: Gross National Income per Capita

Cost of Living

Data on the cost of living are presented in Graphic 2. The cost of living was 745.44 Turkish lira (TL) in August 2003 in Turkey, increasing slightly until January 2007 to reach 1000.7 TL. It reached 1245.96 TL with a rapid increase in January 2008 and then increased slightly until January 2011, reaching 1507.86 TL. However, the cost of living in Turkey increased rapidly after 2011 and reached 3939.69 TL in February 2021. Thus, by February 2021, the cost of living had risen approximately three times compared to the index for 2011.
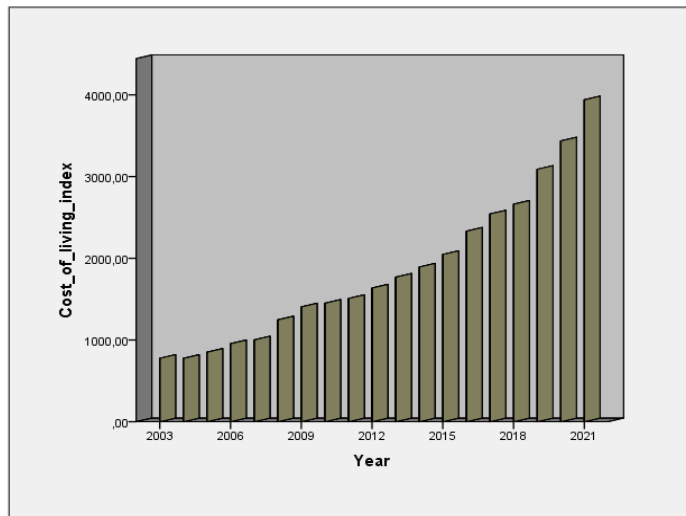
Graphic 2: The Cost of Living

Unemployment Rate

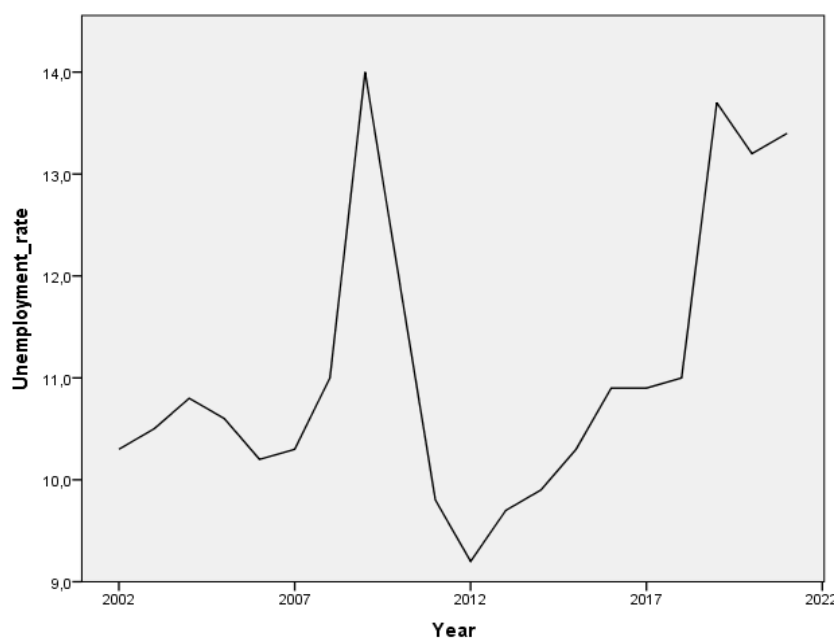Data on the unemployment rate are presented in Graphic 3. The unemployment rate in
Turkey was 10.3% in 2002, and it increased slightly until 2008 and reached 11%. After 2008,
there was a sharp increase in the unemployment rate. From 11% in 2008, it increased to 14%
in 2009. However, there was a sharp decline in the unemployment rate after 2009. From 14%
in 2009, it declined to 9.2% by 2012. After 2012, the situation was reversed again with an
ongoing increase in the unemployment rate from 2012 to 2021. From 9.2% in 2012, it rose to
13.4% in 2021. Thus, since 2012, when the unemployment rate was at its lowest level, it has
increased by approximately 50%.

Graphic 3: Unemployment Rate

Number of Suicides

Data on the number of suicides are presented in Graphic 4. The number of suicides in
Turkey was 2,705 in 2003, increasing to 2,816 by 2008 with very slight fluctuations. From
2,816 in 2008, the number of suicides decreased to 2,677 in 2011. There was then a sharp
increase in the number of suicides after 2011. From 2,677 in 2011, suicides continued to
increase steadily, reaching 3,406 in 2019. Thus, in 2019, the number of suicides was increased
by approximately 30% compared to 2011.
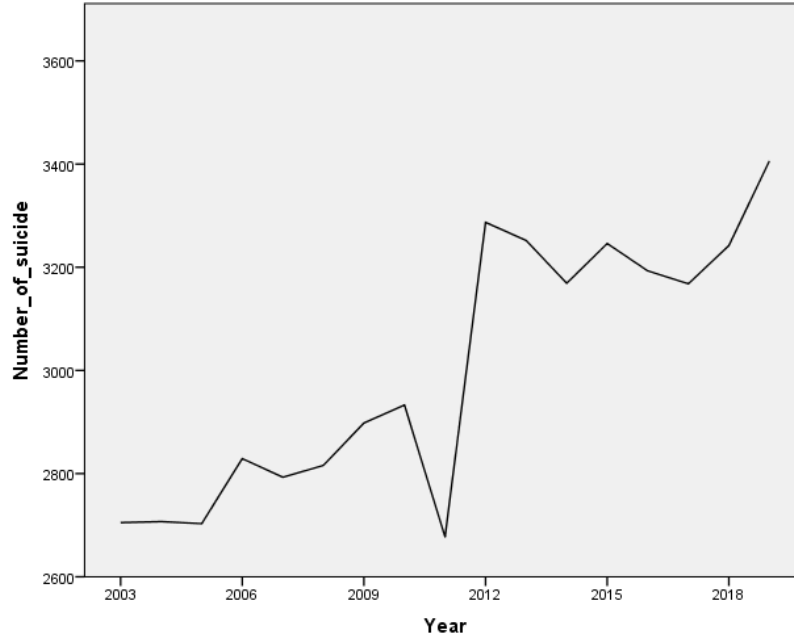
Graphic 4: Number of Suicides

Discussion

This study has aimed to explain the deep collective discontent in Turkey with the J-curve model by associating it with the social and political conditions of the country. For this purpose, I have analyzed TURKSTAT data on GNI per capita, the cost of living, the number of suicides, and unemployment rates between 2002 and 2021. Studies on the J-curve have remained very limited in Turkey; those conducted to date have been undertaken in the context of economic and industrial relations (Halicioglu 2008a; Halicioglu 2008b; Akbostanci 2004; Durmaz 2015), but the sociological dimensions have been ignored. The most important contribution of the current research is to assess the J-curve model from a sociological perspective by associating it with social and political events. When the statistical data are evaluated in general, it is seen that the J-curve model is valid for Turkey. In this section, I will evaluate the available statistical data in more detail by correlating them with political and social events.

Before the Justice and Development Party (AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) came to power in 2002, there was deep collective discontent in Turkey and GNI per capita was very low. It was this collective discontent that brought the AKP to power in 2002. Thereafter, the welfare level in Turkey started to rise rapidly. This increase in welfare level continued until 2008. We can see this reflected in GNI per capita, the cost of living, the unemployment rate, and the number of suicides. For example, GNI per capita was $3,660 in 2002 and had risen to

$10,931 as of 2008. Thus, GNI per capita in Turkey increased by approximately 300% from 2002 to 2008. We can also see the reflection of this improvement in the number of suicides and the cost of living. The number of suicides was 2,705 in 2003, and it remained almost the same in 2007. Likewise, there was no sharp increase in the cost of living.

With the AKP government, people started to gain some expectations that they could not have had before. The improvement in economic and social conditions and the increase in the welfare level made it possible to meet those expectations. This situation led a majority of the people to support the AKP government. More peaceful policies were developed both nationally and internationally in parallel with the increased welfare level. The AKP, an Islamist party, realized what its predecessors could not and managed to integrate itself with the current order (Turam 2007). Even though president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP's leader, was personally religious, he consistently emphasized that he was different from Islamists in the political arena. He metaphorically captured that difference by stating that "we have taken off the Milli [National] Outlook shirt" (Tuğal 2009). Under these conditions, economic and social development became more possible, and the United States and Europe viewed the AKP as a democratic model in contrast to other Islamist movements. In parallel, Turkey's views on the United States and Europe skewed more positively (Tuğal 2009).

In 2008, this progress was interrupted for various reasons. The 2008 global economic crisis shook Turkey to a certain extent. Moreover, Turkey's internal problems, such as an attempt to shut down the AKP (Akkoyunlu & Öktem 2016), caused the effects of the global crisis to be felt more intensely. We can see these effects of the crisis on the rate of unemployment, cost of living, and GNI per capita. The unemployment rate was 11% in 2008 and had increased to 14% in 2009. The number of the unemployed was 2,611,000 in 2008; this figure increased by approximately 40% in 2009 to reach 3,471,000. GNI per capita, which was $10,931 in 2008, declined to $9,039 in 2009. Finally, the cost of living, which was 1000.7 TL in 2007, increased by 40% in 2009 to reach 1404.66 TL.

After this slight interruption of progress in 2008 due to both global and domestic problems, after 2009, the progress resumed where it had left off. People once again began to enjoy the economic power to realize their expectations. This is again reflected in GNI per capita, the rate of unemployment, and the cost of living. GNI per capita, which was $9,039 in 2009, rose to $12,519 in 2013, reaching its peak during AKP rule. While the unemployment rate was

14% in 2009, it declined to 9.2% in 2012. The number of unemployed people in 2009 was 3,471,000 and this figure had decreased to 2,518,000 as of 2012.

Until 2012/2013, under AKP governance, Turkey's welfare level increased significantly. However, the policies implemented by the AKP government after 2012/2013 led to a decrease in the welfare level. When we consider the practices of the AKP in its third term, we see that it moved away from the spirit of its first period and returned to the spirit of Islamic political parties before 2000. This shift can be observed in the AKP's attitude within both the nation and international relations. The party made a clear return to its Islamist perspective, discourse, and practice (Eligür 2010). To an extent, the AKP's Middle East policy is shaped within this framework. It is also linked to the Ottoman legacy. In Şen's words, the "AKP's Middle East policy is largely based on the idea of neo-Ottomanism, recalling the glorious and victorious Ottoman past to make Turkey a regional power" (Şen 2010: 63). A similar change can also be seen in AKP domestic policies. The main goal of the AKP, upon beginning to accumulate hegemonic power (Öniş 2015), has been to consolidate its position vis-à-vis Turkey's "founding" forces and transform Turkish society along a conservative-Islamist line (Kaygusuz 2018). The Gezi Park protests can be viewed as a result of this sharp transformation in the AKP's policies. More precisely, it may be understood as the breaking point in the line of development of public welfare. The events of 2016-2017 caused this decline to accelerate much more drastically. The failed coup attempt of the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ: *Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü*) in 2016 was very influential in this regard. The failed coup attempt and its immediate aftermath, namely the policies put into effect by the AKP such as the "Turkish-type presidential system" (Özsoy Boyunsuz 2016), decree-laws (Kaygusuz 2018), led to a further decrease in the welfare level.

All of these events in the political and social spheres were closely related to Turkey's levels of social and economic development. As a result of these events, social and economic development started to reverse. We can see this much more clearly when we come to the 2020s. GNI per capita, which saw its peak in 2013 at $12,519, dropped to $8,599 in 2020. As of 2013, the public suffered economic impoverishment at a rate of 31%. Likewise, the unemployment rate, which was 9.2% in 2012, rose to 13.4% in 2021. The number of unemployed people grew from 2,518,000 in 2012 to 4,236,000 in February 2021. The cost of living, which was 1507.86 TL in 2012, increased by approximately three times to reach 3939.69 TL in 2021. In direct correlation with these trends, there has been a significant increase in suicides since 2012. Furthermore, in addition to the factors mentioned above, COVID-19 has also played an

important role. Due to COVID-19, the crisis in Turkey was felt much more profoundly—but, of course, this does not mean that COVID-19 is the only reason for Turkey's social and economic decline and the discontent it has created.

All of the data presented above clearly show that the welfare level in Turkey, which increased significantly between 2002 and 2012/2013, has decreased sharply since 2013. Thus, we see the answer to the question posed above: The period between 2002 and 2021 is graphically compatible with the J-curve (Figure 3). Data on GNI per capita between 2002 and 2021 reveal a graphic similar to the J-curve (as seen in Graphic 1). The cost of living, unemployment rates, and numbers of suicides are also in line with these data. Accordingly, there was significant economic and social development between 2002 and 2012/2013. In parallel with this development, people's value expectations increased. However, this economic and social development was followed by a sharp turn as of 2013, leading to a severe decrease in people's value capability. The gap between what people want and what they get is now approaching an intolerable size in 2021, creating severe discontent.

Figure 3. J-Curve of Turkey

CONCLUSION

This study, which shows that the J-curve model is valid for Turkey, offers a scientific explanation for understanding the sources of the increasing discontent in Turkey. The results of this study can help government planners to better understand the conditions in Turkey. The AKP government seeks the sources of the collective discontent that has begun to spread in the society for ideological reasons rather than economic and social reasons. When government planners approach the issue from an economic and social point of view, they compare Turkey after 2002 with Turkey before 2002 and focus on the magnitude of the progress after 2002. As stated by government planners, Turkey has made great progress in economic and social areas between 2002-2012/2013 when compared to the period before 2002. However, from 2012/2013, especially from 2017, this progress has been sharply reversed. This situation graphically reveals the J-curve. According to the J-curve model, this situation is the source of collective discontent. Therefore, I can say that one of the most important sources of collective discontent in Turkey is this sharp reversal phase in the economic and social sphere. This situation is a fact that government planners completely ignore. In conclusion, this study offers an alternative perspective for both government planners and society in understanding the source of collective discontent in Turkey. Government planners can change the J-curve by enacting policies to improve economic and social conditions to reduce growing collective discontent in Turkey.

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