

# İstanbul İktisat Dergisi Istanbul Journal of Economics

## Research Article

## Open Access

# The New Front in the Culture Wars: Cultural Transformation, Family and Social Policies



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## Abstract

Today, the concept of “family” is a subject situated at the intersection of social, economic, and cultural policy research. Three fundamental dynamics underlie this intersection: the problems faced by welfare states, neoliberal transformations in the economic sphere, and the rise of cultural policies. This article examines the phenomenon of the family in terms of its cultural dimensions as well as its social and economic dynamics. The institution of the family is analysed from a perspective that considers global and local economic and political developments. In the context of social policies, attention is drawn to the cultural dimension of the issue, and in particular, to the dimension of culture wars. The “family” should be analysed not only in terms of economic growth and employment but also in terms of its social and cultural dimensions. The role and structure of the family deserve to be examined not only through sociological and cultural perspectives but also within the context of political discourse. Issues of political conflict around the world and in Turkey have rapidly shifted from being purely economic and political to becoming cultural, both within societies (culture wars) and between civilisations (clash of civilisations). The formation of the new political culture is rooted in the cultural politics of the 1968 revolutions. Beginning as a counterculture movement in May '68 and later becoming popularised as it institutionalised itself within the neoliberal economic structure, the “revolution of desire” ushered in a new political culture. Conservatives began to search for a countercultural revolution in opposition to the sexual revolution of 1968. The “family” constitutes the most vital front in the cultural war, alongside areas such as “art,” “media,” “law,” and “politics.” Concepts and themes such as “gender,” “LGBT,” and “abortion” represent issues that manifest the new family-centred cultural politicisation. Family values have increasingly become central to discourse and political struggle. While cultural policies were considered a part of social policies in the 1970s, social policies today have begun to become an extension of cultural policies. This study will focus on the effects of cultural wars conducted in the context of “family” on social policies.

## Keywords

Family • Social Policy • Population • Culture Wars

## Jel Codes

I3, J1, Z1



“ Citation: Etil, H. (2025). The new front in the culture wars: Cultural transformation, family and social policies. *İstanbul İktisat Dergisi–Istanbul Journal of Economics*, 75(2), 614–631. <https://doi.org/10.26650/ISTJECON2025-1826753>

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## The New Front in the Culture Wars: Cultural Transformation, Family and Social Policies

Today, the concept of “family” stands at the intersection of social, economic, and cultural policies. The “family” has been regarded as a fundamental unit, particularly within welfare regimes. Southern European welfare regimes, in particular, have assigned a central role to the family and its living standards within labour markets, social assistance programmes, and social security structures (Ferrera, 1996). After the Second World War, European societies entered a new golden age (Hobsbawm, 1996). Growth and employment increased, production and productivity rose, populations expanded, social security systems strengthened, universities became more accessible, and healthcare systems improved. The heyday of welfare societies also represented the golden age of the modern middle-class family. However, following these positive indicators and narratives of a “golden age,” the concept of the family has increasingly been associated with narratives of decline and collapse. Population structures, social inequalities, and problems in healthcare and education services have grown day by day. For example, today social scientists are studying the phenomenon of “voluntary childlessness” instead of the “baby boom” following the Second World War. In order to thoroughly analyse the dynamics behind narratives of “family decline,” it is essential to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. In addition to demographic and socioeconomic factors, attention must be directed towards structural transformations in political culture.

For a long time, societies have been divided more along cultural and moral lines than economic and political disagreements. Sociologists and political scientists have introduced the concept of the “culture war” to define and explain this phenomenon (Hunter, 1991). Although the “culture war” debate is sometimes viewed as an archaic issue within the context of modernisation and secularisation theories, it continues to shape the “late modern era.” Secularisation theories assumed that increasingly materialistic modern individuals would distance themselves from spiritual issues and become beings governed by rational economic principles (Ardıç, 2008, p. 64). However, postindustrial societies have become more affected by cultural and spiritual issues than by economic or material concerns (Touraine, 1971). During this process, as postmaterialist social movements gained strength, opposing moral and cultural visions became *sui generis* realities. Rival visions and rhetorical frameworks targeting moral and cultural authority began to dominate public discourse. As Olivier Roy also observes, when popular phenomena such as feminism, gender debates, wokism, and cancel culture are considered, contemporary political conflicts shift from social issues to cultural ones (Roy, 2024, p. 15). As the axes of public debate shift from the economy to culture, notable transformations have also emerged in the realm of cultural tension. In the modern period, religion constituted the primary basis of culture wars fought on secular and secularist grounds during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the new culture wars, however, the battleground is shifting towards individual themes such as family, sexuality, feminism, ecology, animal rights, and homosexuality. The origins of the intensified culture wars after the end of the Cold War, marking the transition from ideological and political-economic struggle to cultural struggle, are rooted in the progressive cultural revolution of May 1968.

### The Progressive Cultural Revolution of 1968

The events of 1968 represent, in many respects, a historic turning point in world politics. The revolutions of '68 were not, first and foremost, revolutions in the conventional sense, i.e., the seizure of political power, but they nevertheless succeeded in reshaping the world (that is, the cultural framework) in which notions

of good and evil are evaluated. Transforming everyday life became more important than capturing political power or overthrowing economic structures. In the words of John Holloway (2011), the revolutions of '68 embodied the idea of changing the world without taking power. The revolutions of 1968 were also, in Raymond Williams's (1961) terms, "long revolutions." Through this revolutionary process, value judgments were radically transformed over the last fifty years without relying on state power.

After 1968, the theories of social revolution (Marx) and political revolution (Lenin), which had previously dominated leftist thought, began to give way to the approach of cultural revolution (Gramsci, Mao, Williams). During this period, new social movements discovered that culture, rather than the state or the economy, possessed the transformative power to reshape the world. More importantly, the traditional right-wing and left-wing political categories derived from economic-political divisions underwent a comprehensive restructuring during this process. Throughout much of the twentieth century, politics had been defined primarily along economic lines, considering the inequalities of opportunity created by capitalism. Thus, for the left, political focus centred on workers and workplaces, the leverage of trade unions and organised labour against corporate interests, social welfare initiatives for the poor and disadvantaged, and various other calls for a fair redistribution of national wealth in the name of the public good. It was assumed that the working class would support political parties advocating these progressive policies. Political struggle reflected economic conflict. This was true not only in Western Europe but also in the United States (Hunter, 1991, p. 138). The revolutions of '68 resulted in the emergence of a new left and a new right. In the words of Anthony Giddens, radical politics beyond the left and right constitute "life politics." "Life politics is the politics of lifestyles rather than life chances" (Giddens, 2009, p. 21). Yet the new political culture would be characterised not by the "constructive politics" that Giddens normatively envisioned but by the "destructive politics" desired by Herbert Marcuse (1955).

The culture war initiated by '68 began to be considered as significant as the Cold War. Accordingly, the birth of cultural politics is generally linked to the youth movements of '68. The new left that emerged during the events of 1968 distinguished itself from the old left by focusing on issues such as the environment, sexuality, and freedom. "'68 was the moment when cultural politics was born across the world" (Gürpınar, 2016, p. 49). The new left that arose in opposition to the old left placed cultural struggle above political and social struggle. Progressive agendas no longer passed through trade-union activism or organised political mobilisation. Instead, progressive agendas shifted from the domain of "social issues" to that of "cultural issues." The retrenchment of welfare-state regimes played a major role in the abandonment of the social-issues paradigm. As ideologies faded, identities began to occupy centre stage in politics, and the left reinvented itself through identities and victimisation (sexual, ethnic, cultural identities, minorities). Ideological struggles gave way to conflicts over worldviews (*Weltanschauung*). Political discourse assumed metaphysical dimensions during this period. Debates on economic development gradually gave way to issues that could be described as "spiritual." From this perspective, after '68, it became impossible to relegate identities, whether ethnic, sectarian, sexual, or cultural, to the private and nonpolitical spheres. The questioning of the family as an institution, opposition to patriarchy, anti-nuclear politics, and visibility of sub-identities and cultural groups became defining political themes of the period. The '68 movement symbolised the rebellion of women against their husbands, children against their parents, and younger generations against older ones (Hobsbawm, 1996, p. 386).

Unlike classical leftist politics, which regarded the working class as the historical agent of change, the new progressive left identified youth as the fundamental political actor. In this political vision, youth came

to the forefront as an unprecedentedly autonomous, independent, and self-governing actor. A romantic identification emerged between youth and life. The baby-boom generation, born after the Second World War during a period of economic prosperity, mass consumption, and expanding higher education, grew up in an optimistic and hedonistic environment. Following the devastating experiences of earlier generations who had lived through two world wars, Western societies entered an era of optimism, conformity, and pleasure-seeking. The baby boomers, raised in this secure and conformist context, rebelled against gerontocracy through the youth movements of '68. Like the romantic generations of the 1820s, the '68 generation demanded an aesthetic version of modernity. "They sought liberation from family pressure, the morality imposed by the family, and rigid norms. Rock 'n' roll, unconventional new fashion styles, hairstyles, and sexual freedom were manifestations of youth culture, which for the first time created its own unique space in the 1960s" (Gürpınar, 2016, p. 51).

The inscription written in capital letters at the entrance of the University of Strasbourg, "*Anyone who speaks of revolution without changing everyday life is speaking nonsense*", summarized perfectly what the militants of '68 sought to achieve. The goal was not merely political or economic struggle but the establishment of a new mode of life (Demirer, 1987, p. 141). The fundamental aim of '68 was to change life itself and reinterpret society from a radical standpoint. During the 1968 process, the sexual revolution—or "revolution of desire"—emerged as the most fundamental revolutionary vision of the era. A new identity was forged between "revolution" and "making love," something unimaginable for previous revolutionary generations. In this context, sexuality became central to the struggle. The '68 movement generated a series of slogans: "Power to the imagination," "Freedom for passions," "End work," "Let us live," "Make love, not war," "Structures don't take to the streets," "Prohibition is forbidden," "Boredom is counter-revolutionary," "Run, comrade, the old world is behind you," "There is a beach beneath the paving stones," "There is no revolutionary thought, there is only revolutionary action," "Consider your desires real," "My body, my business," etc. With the 1968 student movement and cultural revolution, youth culture became globalised, and the sexual revolution entered the public sphere as a new agenda. As Roy emphasises, the 1960s represent a major turning point in the understanding of values. This was an anthropological revolution, a transformation affecting the conception of human existence (Roy, 2024, p. 23). The youth rebellions of this period rested on the complete delegitimization of the past. A cultural war battleground emerged between the new progressive agendas of the new left and conservative values.

The counterculture movement of the 1960s, interpreted as a cultural "big bang", proposed a re-evaluation of all cultural values created throughout human history. Everything had to be questioned: family, work, education, success, child-rearing, gender relations, sexuality, urban life, science, technology, and progress (Aksakal, 2023, p. 230). The counterculture positioned itself in absolute opposition to the values of the "silent generation" and conservatives. The movement distanced itself from classical leftist approaches, pursuing an unorganised and theory-free path. Its pioneers opposed consumerism, corrupt social culture, and the American war machine; they resisted alienation in working life and standardisation in social existence; they sought authenticity and pursued self-realisation; they were pacifist and environmentalist. Yet despite the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness, they were too fragmented to pursue a political revolution (Aksakal, 2023, p. 243). The New Left, grounded in culture-oriented politics, was a broad movement of activists advocating for numerous social issues across the Western world during the "long 1960s": political rights, civil rights, environmentalism, women's rights, gay rights, abortion rights, and gender equality (Aksakal, 2023, p. 243). The countercultural ethos of the 1960s was so deeply unsettling to authority figures, from fathers to state officials, that it triggered systematic pressure on youth (Aksakal, 2023, p. 251).

The cultural revolution of '68 produced a revolution in political culture. Roy analyzes the cultural crisis brought about by this tectonic shift, this normative movement towards freedom, as occurring on four levels: first, the transformation of values brought about by the individualistic and hedonistic revolution of the 1960s; second, the internet revolution; third, neoliberal financial globalisation; and fourth, the globalisation of space and human mobility, i.e. statelessness (Roy, 2024, p. 17). This youth counterculture increasingly turned its attention towards the family, society, and the state. Due to the new technological and political transformations, Roy argues that the working class had objectively ceased to be the revolutionary subject of history. Within the affluent structure of the welfare state, the working class was no longer a political actor capable of transforming the system; the working-class struggle had been reduced to wage demands. "Youth" came to be regarded as the radical subject of the new era, as theorised by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Instead of injustices and inequalities in income distribution, the agenda of politicised youth revolved around cultural justice and cultural injustices. Issues such as sexual identities, minority rights, antiwar sentiment, nuclear weapons, environmental concerns, and abortion took centre stage. This political and cultural background shaped the political and ideological formation of the '68 generation.

The flirtation of educated, white, liberal youth with the left developed within this environment of social fragmentation. This was a new type of politics, one that glorified individuality and spontaneity rather than organisation, the long-standing fetish of the left. The New Left was extremely individualistic in contrast to the older left. The new left shifted from individual demands to societal demands (Gürpınar, 2016, pp. 52-53). This period, encapsulated by the slogan "the personal is political," witnessed the prioritisation of individual rights and freedoms over class-based struggles. The 1968 revolution universalised conformist individualism. "The 1968 revolution was fundamentally an individualistic and hedonistic revolution. One of its major slogans, 'the personal is political', challenged the pre-1968 understanding that confined politics to macro-level issues, and it introduced everyday life from the private sphere into the political arena" (Gürpınar, 2016, p. 79).

Daily life and personal relationships began to be interpreted as areas interwoven with power. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, this perspective reads everyday relations as manifestations of power dynamics, interpreting many situations deemed "normal" in traditional societies as ideologically charged. It was argued that many nonpublic domains, sexuality, family, and morality, were defined by power relations. From the standpoint of the sexual revolution, the family could be viewed as the perfected form of a repressive organisation. The family represented the apex of domination (Aytaç, 2012, p. 18). Critiques of religion, the state, and capitalism evolved into critiques of the family. Eliminating gerontocracy and patriarchy, both within the family and in the political sphere, became fundamental objectives. The revolutionary fervour of the youth of 1968 signified a radical rebellion against the dominant culture and its associated values. Sexuality was at the centre of this struggle. Thus, with the 1968 revolution, cultural demands began to inspire political commitment rather than the reverse (Roy, 2024, p. 21). The idea of authority underwent total deconstruction; authority was radically negated at every level, from religion to family, school to the military, literature to psychoanalysis, and language to culture.

Although the revolutions of 1968 followed the intellectual lineage of the "radical Enlightenment" (Jonathan Israel), this radicalisation was more cultural than political. It was fundamentally different from classical bourgeois revolutions, proletarian revolutions, or nationalist popular movements. The 1968 revolution, which focused on the "desiring individual," stood in continuity with the Enlightenment ideology

in making the individual and individual rights the starting point of social bonds. However, the great innovation of the 1960s generation lies here: *desire* replaced *reason* as the basis of autonomy and freedom, ushering in a completely new project of liberation. Pleasure became legitimate in itself (Roy, 2024, p. 22). The intrinsic ties between the family and sexuality were severed; sexuality ceased to be associated with sin and became the constitutive element of the self. According to Roy, the sexual revolution advanced along two axes: sexuality and procreation have been separated; husband-wife relationships have been redefined on the basis of an egalitarian contract. Gender equality, sexual freedom, abortion rights, and same-sex marriage increased their influence, power, and legitimacy—forming a paradigm that no conservative party could reverse (Roy, 2024, p. 23). This was seen as an anthropological paradigm shift, not merely a political one, because this transformation was not based on a political ideology or the rise of an authoritarian party (Roy, 2024, p. 23). The New Left’s strategy can be seen as a new form of cultural hegemony that sought to transform the world without coming to power. It did not manifest primarily as a new political power structure but as the expression of a new human being, a new society, and a new culture. In short, the cultural and sexual revolution of the 1960s challenged traditional family and domestic ideals; it led to declines in marriage and birth rates; it encouraged extramarital sexual relations; and divorce rates increased in the following period. This radical assault on traditional values created a dynamic and heated political environment.

### Search for a Conservative Cultural Revolution Against Desire Revolution

In the second half of the twentieth century, it was widely assumed that distinctions based on faith and religious communities had largely dissolved and thus no longer held political significance. The prevailing belief was that religion had been relegated to the private sphere and thereby domesticated. What now mattered were differences based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Hunter & Wolfe, 2006, p. 11). This constituted the fundamental distinction between the cultural wars of the twentieth century and those of the nineteenth century. The first generation of culture wars focused on the relationship between religion and the state during the formation of secular nation states. In these earlier conflicts, cultural revolutions were pursued by the state in the name of secularism. The new generation of culture wars, however, expanded from the axis of secularism to encompass all areas of lifestyle, presenting a more specialised and complex picture (Manço, 2023, p. 36). In short, the ideological battle between conservatives and progressive secularists shifted from the issue of religion–state relations to broader cultural concerns.

The conservative awakening, or conservative backlash, did not take long to materialise in response to the cultural rebellion of the '68 generation. The discourse that emerged in response to the newly rising youth subculture and its strong public visibility in the United States was developed around the notion of the “silent majority.” President Nixon, in particular, appealed to “deep America,” which adhered to traditional values in contrast to the rebelliousness of the new generation. The idea circulated that a broad silent majority existed, one that neither protested nor marched in the streets, standing in opposition to the nihilism of the cultural left (Gürpınar, 2016, p. 55). However, it was not until the 1980s that the conflict crystallised and began to shape politics more profoundly. While the new left was being debated in the 1960s, the new right became the subject of discussion from the 1980s onward. Like the new left, the new right was also centred on identity, rather than classical economic-political distinctions. Conservatives were late to understand the magnitude of the challenge posed by the 1960s counterculture to long-standing values, sensibilities, and social institutions. They only began taking it seriously once the counterculture had become, in many respects, the dominant culture (Hunter & Wolfe, 2006: 76). In the Western world, especially in the United States, the right-wing politicisation of the culture war took shape throughout the 1990s. On August 17, 1992,

conservative writer and former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan declared a cultural war: “There is a religious war going on in this country for the soul of America. This is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself” (Hunter & Wolfe, 2006, p. 1).

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, American sociologist James Davison Hunter published his influential book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991), which fundamentally shaped debates on cultural policy. In this book, Hunter identified a conflict between two moral visions: orthodoxy, defined as externally grounded, transcendent, and institutionally anchored; and progressivism, which he described as rooted in the rationalist, subjective, and experimental spirit of the modern era. For those with an orthodox outlook, the moral order drew its legitimacy from continuity with principles inherited from the past. Progressives, on the other hand, idealised experimentation, adaptation, and innovation, claiming that a world without fixed moral rules would produce a freer society. This worldview rejected the possibility of universal moral standards, locating reality in personal experience and historically contingent meaning. What is “real” and “good” becomes personal, relative, and temporary rather than fixed or eternal. In summary, according to Hunter, the essence of the culture war lies in competing conceptions of the good and the legitimation of moral authority.

From this perspective, the culture war was reshaping American public culture, generating profound tensions and contradictions. These contradictions were not merely superficial but extended to the deepest layers of social life. They manifested not only at the ideological level but also through public symbols, discourse, and institutional structures that shape public culture (Hunter, 1991, p. 13). Beneath numerous political debates, abortion, gender freedoms, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, lays a deep crisis regarding the meaning and purpose of the fundamental institutions of American civilisation. For instance, behind disputes over abortion policy lay a crisis concerning the meaning of motherhood. In a context where behaviorist and game theory dominated social science, particularly political science, the fierce competition between moral visions concerning how public life should be structured was a striking development. The culture war increasingly determined the agenda and boundaries of political debate and political rivalry.

According to Roy, the two reactions that emerged against May ‘68 are truly reactionary, even regressive. They seek to return to a previous state; either to the republican pact, the social contract within the framework of the nation-state, or to the transcendence of culture, religion, or an exalted and untouchable human nature (2024, p. 28). Roy argues that it is now impossible to return to either the organic society imagined by conservatives or the social contract ideal of modernists. The pedagogies of “re-education” no longer function in the digital era. The crisis of culture as education represents one of the key conditions triggering conservative mobilisation. However, conservative movements increasingly present themselves as revolutionary, not merely reactionary. Although the conservative vision contains elements of nostalgia and resistance to change, it is not simply backward-looking or static. Rather, at its best, conservatism seeks conscious continuity with inherited regulatory principles, aiming to revive and realise what it regards as the noblest ideals and achievements of civilisation (Hunter, 1991, p. 14).

The culture war, the struggle to control public culture, is neither an elite intellectual battle nor an abstract struggle detached from public opinion. As Hunter emphasises, public cultural symbols always operate through institutions; thus, cultural conflict crystallises within institutional contexts (Hunter, 1991, p. 173). Among these institutions, the family occupies the most critical place. The struggle over public culture, mediated through institutions, becomes localised and concrete. The family, as a social institution, stands at the forefront of sites where cultural conflict is most intensely experienced. Hunter identifies five primary

institutional arenas in which the contemporary culture war unfolds: “family, education, popular media, law, and electoral politics” (Hunter, 1991, p. 173). The “family” serves as the symbolic battleground for the conflict between progressive and conservative cultural revolutionaries. The family is a potent symbolic arena because the values, hierarchies, and relationships within it mirror the wider social order. Issues concerning male–female relations, authority structures, the status of children, and legitimate sexual identities emerge at the centre of this symbolic struggle. “The passion and conflict of the first decade of the culture war focused primarily on body politics. Disagreements over gender and women’s personal and public rights, the struggle over abortion, and the conflict surrounding homosexuality constituted the constant and heated flashpoints of the struggle” (Hunter, 2013, p. 111).

In traditional culture, the family served as a protective sphere for individuals. In the new era, however, the family has become an institution that conservative individuals must actively defend. It is the most important symbolic zone in the conservative quest for cultural dominance. Following the revolutions of desire, the family lost its traditional tranquility. It rapidly shifted from being a peaceful space to becoming an arena of tension and conflict. Issues such as the status and role of women, the moral legitimacy of abortion, the legal and social standing of homosexuality, rising domestic violence, increasing rates of children born out of wedlock, and the insufficiency of childcare infrastructure fill the headlines of newspapers, magazines, and intellectual publications (Hunter, 1991, p. 176). Family policy has direct spillover effects on other arenas of conflict, education, art, law, and politics. It extends across a wide spectrum: the representation of family in popular culture; legislation concerning family benefits; and voter preferences. As Hunter notes, although the contemporary culture war is not *solely* about the family, issues debated in the realm of family life lie at the centre of the struggle and are perhaps decisive for all others (Hunter, 1991, p. 176).

Deep fears concerning the collapse of the family have become increasingly pronounced among conservatives. These fears are not entirely new; debates about the family were present in the early periods of modernity when the family underwent structural transformation. Industrialisation dissolved extended kinship networks, religious communities, and neighbourhood solidarities, threatening the moral development of youth and disrupting family cohesion. The transition from the traditional extended family to the modern nuclear family preserved a core familial structure. The family was changing but was not ontologically rejected. During the modern era, the nuclear family of the middle classes came to be idealised. At this time, “family” existed as a singular concept; the language of “families” had not yet emerged. However, consensus on the nature, structure, and purpose of the family has collapsed. Divorce, single-parent households, and cohabitation outside marriage are interpreted as signs of institutional dissolution. Optimists argue that the family is not collapsing but is adapting to new social conditions. Conservatives reject this interpretation and seek to reestablish a fixed relationship between traditional family structure and gender roles, opposing abortion and same-sex marriage.

These demographic and cultural transformations have produced a sense of pessimism among conservative intellectuals and policymakers. According to Demographic Transition Theory (1940s), higher levels of social development, industrialisation, education, urbanisation, and women's employment were necessary preconditions for declining fertility (Alpar, 2025, p. 29). Today, many societies, including Turkey, are recognised as “ageing populations”. Demographic change unfolds uniquely in each society due to historical, geographic, social, cultural, economic, and political differences. Nevertheless, demographic change generally progresses in parallel with broader social change (Aysan et al., 2022). Population, a fundamental element of social structure, is the outcome of an extended historical process.

Global economic integration in the late twentieth century reduced nation-states' capacity to regulate labour markets. The relocation of multinational companies to developing economies brought many women into the labour force, diminishing the economic and cultural value assigned to women's domestic roles. Parallel to this, Western feminist movements connected women's liberation to the rejection of traditional gender roles. Women's roles in society were increasingly redefined outside the categories of motherhood and domestic labour. Radical and liberal feminists alike challenged the structures that determined women's social status. However, questioning gender roles also transformed existential issues, such as women's fertility, generating new debates (Yörübulut, 2025, p. 198).

The contemporary culture wars contain a fundamental paradox. As Hunter described for the United States, yet increasingly applicable globally, the political system is shifting to the right, even as culture shifts to the left. Reactive conservative intellectuals in the 1990s began calling for a conservative cultural revolution. Some conservatives, such as Kay S. Hymowitz, argue that much of the negative social trends following 1965; crime, divorce, illegitimacy, and substance abuse; had, by the early 2000s, either reversed or stabilised. Hymowitz claimed that the right's cultural counterrevolution had achieved significant success: "Today Americans are consciously and deliberately embracing ideas about sex, marriage, children, and the American dream, and these ideas are becoming a viable form of bourgeois normality—albeit one that has undoubtedly changed considerably" (Hymowitz, 2004).

However, strongly pessimistic conservatives, such as Gertrude Himmelfarb, argue that if the culture war seems to be over, it is only because the left has already won. According to Himmelfarb, the United States faces: "The collapse of ethical principles and habits, the loss of respect for authority and institutions, the collapse of the family, the decline of civility, the vulgarisation of high culture, and the degradation of popular culture" (Hunter & Wolfe, 2006, p. 55). In her view, America has become "one nation, two cultures" (Himmelfarb, 1999). The culture war has shattered the cultural unity of nation states. The very culture that once underpinned national cohesion has begun to signal its own dissolution. Popular culture, shaped increasingly by the left-liberal values of the post-1960s era, further amplified these tensions. As neoliberal capitalism advanced after the 1980s, the counterculture of the 1960s became mainstream culture. In response, conservative cultural revolutionaries intensified their activism to re-moralise public and popular culture. Family values became central to conservative cultural activism.

### **Towards a New Political Culture: Cultural Politics After "Gezi"**

The earliest major debates concerning the family in Turkey actually date back to the establishment of modern Turkey. This is because the Republic's ideal of contemporary civilisation envisioned the creation of a modern family. "In this respect, even in the earliest phases of the modernisation process, it was understood that to establish a modern political structure, the lifestyles and mentalities of the actors within this structure had to be transformed. The goal of this transformation process was to realise the ideal of a community of citizens composed of autonomous and rational individuals who were expected to lead happy and peaceful lives within their own homes." (Aytaç, 2012, p. 12).

It is often argued that modernisation is a process of transformation that extends beyond social change and fundamentally alters social structures. In particular, the transformation of economic production relations, from agriculture to industry, brought about corresponding transformations in social institutions. The family underwent structural change during this process. The emergence of the nuclear family as the dominant form has been extensively discussed in both European-centred sociological analyses and Amer-

ican functionalist thought. Factors such as the decline in the number of children within nuclear families, increased access to education for both men and women, and the corresponding transformation of gender roles in the public sphere have been central to these discussions. Changes in the traditional understanding of privacy also constitute an important dimension of this transformation. Particularly among generations born after the Second World War—who viewed the values of the past as restrictive and oppressive in relation to human freedom—the family began to be regarded as a serious social problem, especially in Western Europe and the United States. This shift marked a transition to a context in which both marriage and divorce lost their traditional meanings. Alongside forms of family life that deviated entirely from the traditional structure, new models such as cohabitation and voluntary childlessness emerged (Akın, 2025, p. 168).

The founding philosophy of the Republic of Turkey, conceived as a modernisation project, also adopted a gender equality approach (Sığın, 2023, p. 258). In Turkey, the first two major waves of progressive movements were national and socialist revolutions. In these two initial phases of progressive politics, the family issue did not possess a destructive character. Indeed, the 1968 movement in Turkey differed categorically from its Western counterparts. In Turkey, the youth movement did not embrace an antifamily orientation centred on a “sexual revolution” (Aytaç, 2012, p. 13). Whereas youth movements in Western Europe and the United States constructed alternative lifestyles through communes, associations, and political organisations outside the family structure, Turkish youth derived their desired lifestyle not in opposition to family life but through politicisation within public organisations. As a result, the youth of Turkey in this period focused more on issues of political participation and public consciousness than on constructing an alternative private sphere (Aytaç, 2012, p. 13).

Following the March 12 political intervention, the centre of activism shifted from university campuses to neighbourhoods. New techniques and tools naturally emerged during this transition. Although the '68 generation in Turkey did not directly confront the family, it harboured a mild critique of traditional family life. Yet by the 1970s, the situation had changed dramatically. Family relations, and the actors who defined them, began to occupy a central place within the metaphorical framework shaping everyday politics. “Family” became a political metaphor used to popularise and legitimise political demands. Terms such as “mother,” “brother,” and “sister” became common political metaphors that permeated everyday political discourse (Aytaç, 2012, p. 14).

Although left-liberal cultural revolutionism had developed in Turkey’s “new left” circles since the 1990s, its intensification occurred in the 2010s. The “moment of sexual revolution” in Turkey became more visible with the Gezi Park protests. Post-2010 politics in Turkey became increasingly centred on culture. Though cultural elements had always served as a leitmotif in Turkish politics, after the 2010s, cultural axes overshadowed all other dimensions. Political division became anchored in lifestyle differences, values, and symbolic practices. The Gezi protests embodied what many consider the spirit of cultural Marxism. The language of the new opposition was cultural: homosexuality, feminism, multiculturalism, secularism, and lifestyle rights constituted fundamental demands. The distinction between cultural Marxism (left-wing liberals), which focused on the libertarian lifestyle in the civil society sphere, and nationalists, who focused on the secular legacy in the state sphere, became even more pronounced during this process. Left-wing liberals interpreted the spirit of Gezi, and its cultural-intellectual hegemony, as a spiritual challenge to the conservative majority. Both blocs found themselves fighting for “the spirit of Turkey.” As ideologies that once structured political identities weakened, ontological identities gained prominence. The earlier goal of “Westernising the family” and establishing a “modern family” gave way to more radical discourses advocating the abolition of the

family, portraying the family as a form of “hell,” and calling for the deconstruction of social roles within the family (mother, father, and child). As Eagleton stated, from the perspective of the new left, the liberation of the copulating body, rather than the working body, became the central political issue (Eagleton, 2004, p. 3). For modernisation to truly penetrate society, the family, understood as the bastion of the nation, had to be conquered.

After 2010, cultural agendas increasingly shaped Turkish politics. Issues such as alcohol regulation, abortion debates, and compulsory (or elective) religious education provoked outrage within the secular public sphere, perceived as elements of a gradual, planned project to make Turkey more conservative. Yet it may also be argued that these policies reflect not only attempts at Islamization but also reflexive measures by the AKP to preserve its moral-cultural foundations despite accelerating social secularisation. A conservative and conformist social order, and its underlying moral framework, is considered the bedrock upon which the party’s political power rests (Gürpınar, 2016, p. 126).

Gürpınar argues that the Gezi Park protests may be interpreted as Turkey’s version of 1968, at least in terms of agenda and concerns. The Gezi moment shifted Turkey’s political agenda and introduced unfamiliar cultural issues. Leaving aside ideological disputes, one may easily count LGBT activism, environmentalism, and feminism as the main “winners” of Gezi (Gürpınar, 2016, p. 220). This new activism—focused on environmental issues, women’s rights, urban rights, LGBT rights, and animal rights—constituted the cultural spirit of Gezi. Massive pride marches held shortly after Gezi symbolised the rising visibility of LGBT activism. It is appropriate to establish close links between Gezi and homosexuality, Gezi and ecology, and Gezi and animal rights. These movements adapted secular political energy to new cultural issues, replacing class politics with identity-centred activism. The “communist manifestos” of the old left ceded space to “trans manifestos,” one of which adopted the militant slogan: “We will not change; you will get used to it!” (Şeker, 2013, p. 274). Increasing middle-class prosperity reinforced alignment with Western progressive cultural agendas. LGBT politics became normalised within the left-secular sphere. Women’s politics advanced despite internal resistance. Environmental, feminist, and LGBT politics collectively formed the moral-cultural battlefield of the new era. Even though the classical left considered itself the rightful ideological leader, actual cultural leadership passed to the new left, cultural Marxism.

Along with this process, while religion continued to be visible in public life, issues concerning the family began to take precedence over religious issues. Signs that the family would become a controversial public policy issue had emerged before the 1980s. Issues such as divorce, homosexuality, abortion rights, domestic violence, and violence against women came to the fore. Debates about having three children, gender roles, women and men, and the crisis of family and motherhood pointed to a new problem area. “From this perspective, the family should be regarded as a political unit capable of enabling a radical critique of individualism, which stems from the mindset underlying the abstract, rootless, and universal human design of enlightened liberalism” (Aytaç, 2012, p. 18).

Population policies are at the forefront of the concrete manifestations of this major cultural policy area. One of the most critical dimensions of the family debate is the population issue. The changes in Türkiye’s population structure have occurred at a rate rarely seen elsewhere in the world. The demographic scenarios and future projections for today’s Türkiye are now entirely different. This has brought back statements and practices aimed at increasing fertility in the 21st century. The reasons behind this perspective include low fertility rates and longer life expectancy, which lead to the ageing of the population. In today’s world, which is experiencing the final stage of demographic transition, birth and death rates have declined, international

migration has accelerated, the population has begun to age, and the population growth rate has slowed down. As the country's age, gender, and ethnic structure changed, in terms of distribution, the population began to live much more densely in cities, especially in the industrialised western regions, and the country's population approached 90 million. According to projections, if the current demographic trends of low death and birth rates continue, Türkiye's population will continue to grow until 2040s (TÜİK, 2022). In 2021, the number of elderly people aged 65 and over was 8.2 million, accounting for 9.7% of the total population. By 2080, the number of people in this age group will rise to 27.4 million, and their share of the total population will increase to 25.6%. The median age, which was 33 in 2017, is expected to rise to 45 in 2080 (Aysan, 2022, p. 38).

On the other hand, the increase in the age of marriage and the decline in divorce rates have had lasting effects on the population and the family. Furthermore, economic factors also have a direct impact on the ages of marriage and motherhood. Rising living costs, economic uncertainties, working in insecure jobs, and irregular employment are decisive factors in decisions about marriage and motherhood. Changes in social norms and, in particular, the rise of individualism, which has led to the widespread acceptance of “cohabitation” and/or “non-marital relationships,” are important factors in this process, which led to fertility decline in Türkiye. These transformations can be attributed to the second demographic transformation in Türkiye, indicating that the evolution in Türkiye's demographic structure continues (Aysan, 2022). Furthermore, advances and diversity in birth control methods may also contribute to the increase in the age of first marriage and motherhood (Koç et al., 2010). Finally, parental leave policies and the level of development of child care support systems can also play an important role in the increase in the age of first marriage and motherhood. The causes and consequences of these two social realities, which continue to increase in almost every part of the world, including Türkiye, are important (Coşan, 2025, pp. 143-144). One of the most important issues that jeopardise the sustainability of the institution of marriage is the economic difficulties couples face in their early years. Economic difficulties become particularly important in the first years of marriage, which is the period when couples get to know each other and adjust to living together. Indeed, “economic difficulties” rank among the top three reasons for divorce among couples in Türkiye. According to TÜİK data (2025), the age of first marriage has risen to 28.3 for men and 25.8 for women. Furthermore, the age of women at first birth was 27.3 in 2024. Considering these data, it can be seen that “late marriages” and “late childbearing” are becoming more common (Ökten, 2025, p. 164).

### Conservative Reaction and Defending the Family

The conservative reaction to left-wing visions of modernity and progressivism did not take long to materialise. Conservatives argued that the sexual revolution constituted a direct attack on the family, particularly on motherhood. According to conservative critics, feminists claimed that it was inherently degrading for women to be mothers or homemakers. Debates regarding authority, parental responsibility, marital commitment, and the moral limits of sexuality form the core of the struggle to define family integrity. Anti-abortion activists consider motherhood the most important and fulfilling role for women; thus, abortion is viewed as an attack on the activity that gives life meaning. For abortion-rights advocates, motherhood is merely one possible role, and imposing it as the only role becomes a burden. No other issue, except perhaps abortion, evokes reactions as intense as homosexuality. Conservatives see it as fundamentally disrupting the natural and moral order and the ideals of middle-class family life.

In the culture war, the patriarchal order and gender equality have created a “fault line” for Türkiye (Sığın, 2023, p. 263). One of the most significant events demonstrating the AKP government's policy shift regarding

gender debates is its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Türkiye withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, which it signed in 2011, in 2021, citing reasons such as the concepts of “gender” and “sexual orientation” not being compatible with the social structure and the inclusion of the Convention being detrimental to the institution of the family (Siğın, 2023, p. 260). During this period, cultural policy shifted towards opposition to gender and LGBT rights and towards the protection of the family institution. While a culture war was waged within the framework of the Istanbul Convention, opposing social gender/social constructionism with biological gender/biological determinism, LGBTQ+ (and the normalisation of homosexuality) was seen as a threat to the social structure and the family (Siğın, 2023, pp. 260-261).

Conservative-religious intellectuals oppose the concept of gender and, along those lines, the Istanbul Convention. For example, according to Muharrem Balcı, the Istanbul Convention is not an international convention. It is a convention that legitimises sexual preference/orientation, separates women and men, devalues concepts such as trust, compassion, and mercy offered to us by Islam, and threatens and disregards marriage, the rights of women and men over each other, their legal and moral responsibilities, and the concept of family (Balcı, 2020a, p. 13). Single-sex families are becoming more common, families are breaking down, illegitimate relationships are becoming widespread, gender neutrality is becoming popular, misandry is becoming widespread, and same-sex marriages are being encouraged. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared the new era of family policies in his speech at the “Family Year Promotion Programme” (2025):

*“We are living in truly strange times. Neoliberal cultural currents are crossing borders and permeating every corner of the world, shaping the social fabric. Series, films, broadcasts, and many other types of content found on digital platforms often cause processes that are difficult to reverse, such as cultural and identity erosion. These contents, which are served consciously, deliberately, and persistently, lead to the gain of ground by LGBT and other natural movements, especially gender neutralisation policies. The primary target of gender neutralisation policies, which use LGBT as a spearhead, is the family and the sanctity of the family institution (...) We will resolutely continue to react to gender neutralisation policies that corrupt the individual, the family, and society in turn” (Erdoğan, 2025a).*

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pursues a conservative agenda on issues such as the “three-child policy,” “abortion policy,” and “the importance of motherhood” (“Strong Family with Mother, Strong Türkiye with Family”). Concerns about the fate of the family are expressed in the context of the idea of “cultural collapse.” For example, at the “8th Family Council,” Erdoğan made similar observations and stated that conservative family policies are not simply a matter of social policy but have a deeper meaning extending from security policies (“generational security”) to cultural policies:

*“The greatest threat to the family in recent times is the gender-neutralisation policies encouraged by global power dynamics. Deviant movements, supported by certain international companies, organisations, brands, and institutions, target the institution of the family itself. The more serious aspect of the issue is that this has become a global imposition rather than a personal lifestyle choice. We are facing global tyranny where even the slightest criticism is silenced, those who object are denied the right to live, defending human nature and family values has become impossible, those who react are subjected to economic, political, and diplomatic pressure, and, in short, a handful of rabid minorities are trying to enslave billions of people. It is our duty to protect the family, and therefore humanity, despite attacks that target not only the relationship between men and women but also our children. Türkiye and the Turkish nation will absolutely not bow to global gender neutralisation impositions. We will not leave our children in the hands of these deviants. We*

*will not allow our family structure to be dynamited” (Erdoğan, 2023).<sup>1</sup>*

In Türkiye, the issue of family and marriage has recently become more prominent on the agenda. Data and indicators related to demographic change have influenced the declaration of 2025 as the "Year of the Family" by the Presidency. The protection of the family has always been an important element of social solidarity. In traditional social structures, the contribution of women and men to strong family solidarity based on gender roles is an important mindset and practice that preserves society. The decline in fertility and population growth rate, the increase in the proportion of elderly people, and the emergence of certain risks for the future of the country's population in this context have been influential in Türkiye's declaration of 2025 as the "Year of the Family." Within this framework, various policies and practices have been implemented to address the problems caused by demographic transformation. The following policies and practices have been put in place to respond to the urgent signals of demographic change, including the decline in fertility in *Turkey: The Vision Document and Action Plan for the Protection and Empowerment of the Family (2024-2028)*, the establishment of the Family Institute in collaboration with universities, the establishment of the Population Policies Council by presidential decree, the creation of the Family and Youth Fund, which provides interest-free financial support to newly married couples, and financial support to encourage fertility (Alpar, 2025, p. 30). Since the 2010s, the growing emphasis on the family has also been reflected in government-supported research. During this period, large-scale national quantitative studies expanded considerably, accompanied by several smaller qualitative and mixed-method studies (Aysan & Aracı, 2025, p. 36).

According to Balcı, the definition of "gender" is not innocent. In this case, the Istanbul Convention departs from universal human rights terminology and turns into a clash of civilisations. According to Balcı, the Istanbul Convention is a text imposed on us by another civilisation (Balcı, 2020a, p. 18). Similarly, the "gender equality" approach is a secular Western project (Balcı, 2020a, p. 41). He states that the concept of "gender equality" developed in feminist theory is not innocent and involves the reconstruction and alteration of traditional female and male roles, and that identities are deconstructed within fluid identities. Femininity and masculinity are being eliminated, and identities are being reduced to performative ones. Queer identities are nothing more than a process of de-gendering. According to him, the fundamental aim of these approaches is nothing other than the eradication of religion, modesty, tradition, and honour (Balcı, 2020a, p. 39). Within the scope of this discourse and these projects, de-gendering and homosexualization are encouraged. The concept of "family" is also diversifying and changing within this process. It has become impossible to speak of a single-family form; now, we speak of *families*. In this process, the terminology of the family is also being neutralised, freed from its traditional burdens. The family is also taking its share from the neutralisation of the world. Within the family, the word "parent" has replaced "mother" and "father," the concepts of "wife" and "husband" have been abandoned, and the word "friend" is preferred over "spouse" (Balcı, 2020a, pp. 82-83). Children are also transformed into individuals without identity and gender, no longer being "girls" or "boys" (Balcı, 2020a, p. 111).

Under the banner of social gender, there is opposition to policies that declare war on gender roles, masculinise women, and feminise men. Accordingly, the family structure is built upon gender. Without

<sup>1</sup>President Erdoğan made similar statements at the International Family Forum (23 May 2025): "Today, humanity is being tested by the most fundamental truths of its existence. Human nature is under organised siege on a global scale. This ideological siege, called freedom but essentially a movement of denial against human creation, threatens not only the family but also women, children, and human dignity. We are observing with concern the alarming extent to which the perversion known as LGBT has reached countries that have opened the door to it for various reasons. This perversion, legitimised under the guise of respect for choice, has today turned into a tyranny that tolerates no other voice or opinion, a true fascism in the full sense of the word. Behind it stand not only certain civil initiatives but also multinational corporations, some international organisations, and certain states. Artists, businesspeople, politicians, and scientists are being lynched and turned into living corpses simply for criticising the LGBT scourge" (Erdoğan, 2025b).

gender, there is no family. Without family, there is no religion, and there is no homeland (Balci, 2020a, p. 170). According to Balci, the Istanbul Convention legitimises different sexual orientations and sexual identities, de-genders society, increases domestic violence, and disperses the family rather than repairing it. It is the dissolution of alliances between the state and LGBT and, conversely, the increase in calls for the state to intervene in the family to strengthen local and national values. According to conservative criticism, politicians, states, and governments are ignoring family values. The new reaction is to place the family back at the centred of public debate. New political and intellectual efforts aimed at strengthening the family have intensified. The aim is to construct an authentic, traditional, conservative culture and a conservative family, free from the destructive harms of modernisation and Westernisation. This coincides with a period in which conservative right-wing politics has been reconfigured on the basis of opposition to gender equality. During this period, conservatism has moved away from gender equality and evolved towards a family-centred discourse. A family free from Western influence and the harms of modernism does not seem possible. Anti-modernism is claimed to be incompatible with mainstream cultural values. The age of progress is destroying the family. The ideology of progress now threatens the family. Anti-modernism is reconstructing itself through the collapse of family values. The theme of the “collapse of the family” is the most popular topic of conservative decline/collapse narratives. Conservatives blame the radical Enlightenment line, progressives, left-wing liberals, and liberals for the collapse of the family. Increases in divorce rates, single-parent families, declining birth rates, declining marriage rates, rising marriage ages, crises in family roles, and the rise of a left-liberal culture that centres the free individual and devalues motherhood, fatherhood, womanhood, and manhood have led to increased political concern about family values. Opposing abortion, promoting natural birth over caesarean section, supporting religious education in schools, fighting against gay and lesbian rights, being vigilant against content that degrades family values in art, film, and popular culture, and waging war on all forms of addiction point to the new political dynamics of conservatism.

As in the rest of the world, the “antigender movement” is gaining strength in Turkiye during this process. This movement opposes corruption projects, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, the right of homosexuals to adopt children, gender mainstreaming in schools, and gender-neutral education. In this sense, the antigender movement is a unique and very serious reaction (Balci, 2020a, p. 153). In summary, despite the cultural collapse and degeneration created by modernism, conservative right-wing politicians and intellectuals are calling for a return to the traditional family structure. Conservatives argue that family policies based on individual rights and freedoms and an egalitarian understanding, within the context of modernism's principles, have brought about the end of their countries (Vardar, 2004, p. 158). They are attempting to develop policies aimed at a return to family forms that are rooted, original, and authentic. Spiritual reactions are developing against the formula of the “political-legal citizen” who seeks equality, contractualism, and universality (Vardar, 2004, p. 151).

Finally, as a result of the cultural transformation that has occurred, the increasing process of individualisation can lead to a deadlock. Mobility driven by education and economics has significant effects on individualisation and the change in traditional gender roles and family values. Family and kinship relations occupy an important place in Turkiye in terms of the transmission of traditional values. However, individualisation, the lifestyle formed in large cities, and changing values will transform these relationships, even if they do not eliminate them (Akın, 2025, p. 176). In this sense, the most concrete step that can be taken would be for the state to implement policies that do not force individuals to choose between their work and private lives. The development of such policies has been stated in both the *Twelfth Development Plan* and the announcements regarding the “Year of the Family.” The results of this concrete step will be seen

in the medium and long term. The main difficulty is the challenge of reversing the changing circumstances resulting from social, cultural, and economic transformations through the policies to be implemented. This is because, in most cases, the policies implemented are not effective enough to reverse individual decisions, such as fertility rates and the age of motherhood. The fact that European countries with more generous social policies than Türkiye have also failed to achieve the desired levels of fertility is the most concrete evidence of this (Coşan, 2025, p. 156).

### **Conclusion: Searching for a New Alliance Between the “State” and the “Family”**

When the transformations occurring globally and within Turkey are considered, together with contemporary public debates, it becomes evident that the “family” has lost its ability to remain untouched by the disruptive effects of modern public life and has become one of the principal issues of cultural alienation. As a result, the progressive agendas of the new left have begun to dominate political culture and reshape political cleavages, creating an entirely new set of challenges. This new political culture has brought an end to a political environment shaped by social and national revolutionary agendas and has ushered in new alignments defined by novel tensions and conflicts.

During this period, conservatism has redefined itself by adapting to emerging problem areas. A new equation has emerged in which cultural power rests with the left while political power rests with the right. Within this new configuration, conservatism has distanced itself from democratic discourse and entered a process of radicalisation. One of the most significant developments in the political culture of this era is that conservatism has become the dominant political philosophy of the right. Just as in the rest of the world, in Turkey as well, with the issue of “immigrants” receding from the forefront of secular nationalist mobilization, conservative themes such as family, children, abortion, and LGBT rights have become the principal concerns of the right.

Although the collapse of the family is often linked to the collapse of the nation, thereby intersecting with nationalist and chauvinist anxieties, conservatism remains the dominant paradigm. The issue of the “family” is at the forefront of the right’s shift towards a more consolidated conservatism. A significant rupture has also occurred in the historical relationship between liberalism and conservatism. The global cultural revolutions have led to the dissolution of the post-second world war alliance between these two traditions. In the Turkish context, the alliance formed during the struggle against political tutelage has gradually eroded under the pressures of cultural warfare. The “family” has increasingly become the central issue in struggles over hegemonic definitions of national identity. Political interest in “family values” has intensified and reached an increasingly heated point. Politics has intervened at a historical moment when individualism is on the rise and moral responsibility towards others is weakening.

The culture war, defined as the struggle between competing moral ideals concerning how public life should be organised and sustained, is deepening in Turkey. Questions about who will hold decisive authority over the country’s future, who will determine cultural dominance, and which moral ideals will shape public culture are generating divergent visions of Turkey. Cultural issues are not merely political ideologies that are reducible to party programmes or electoral strategies; rather, they are moral visions that shape political debate and political rivalry. The most intense and decisive dimension of this moral struggle increasingly centres on the “family”.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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