

## From Conservatism to Turkish Conservatism: Cultural and Political Roots of an Ideology

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### Abstract

This article examines the cultural and political dimensions of an ideology from conservative theory to Turkish conservatism. The article aims to demonstrate the evolution of Turkish conservatism based on the argument that there is a continuity between conservative theory and Turkish conservatism. Conservatism is sometimes defined as an disposition. However, conservatism is a practical ideology. The article first elaborates this argument by drawing on the theories of Michael Freedon and Pierre Bourdieu. Second, having established that conservatism is a practical ideology, he distinguishes the main pillars of conservative ideology. The third part of the article analyzes Turkish conservatism. Accordingly, the roots of Turkish conservatism can be found in the culture-civilization debates of the 19th century. Elaborating the formation of this ideology over the past hundred years, it seems more accurate to mention “Turkish conservatisms” rather than “Turkish conservatism.” The article distinguishes some conservatisms in the history of Turkish conservatism as follows: classical conservatism, nationalist and Islamist conservatism, liberal conservatism. The last part of the article argues how the Justice and Development Party articulates these different conservatisms and inherits a form of conservatism.

**Keywords:** Conservatism, Ideology, Practical Ideology, Turkish Conservatism, Classical Conservatism, Nationalist and Islamist Conservatism, Liberal Conservatism.

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## Muhafazakârlıktan Türk Muhafazakârlığına: Bir İdeolojinin Kültürel ve Politik Kökleri

### Öz

Bu çalışma, muhafazakâr teoriden Türk muhafazakârlığına bir ideolojinin kültürel ve siyasi boyutlarını incelemektedir. Makale muhafazakâr teori ile Türk muhafazakârlığı arasında bir süreklilik olduğu savından hareketle Türk muhafazakârlığının geçirdiği evrimi göstermeyi amaçlıyor. Muhafazakârlık bazen bir tutum olarak tanımlanmıştır. Bununla birlikte, muhafazakârlık pratik bir ideolojidir. Makale, ilk olarak, bu savı Michael Freeden ve Pierre Bourdieu'nun kuramlarından faydalanarak temellendiriyor. İkinci olarak, muhafazakârlığın pratik bir ideoloji olduğunu ortaya koyduktan sonra muhafazakâr ideolojinin ana sütunlarını ayırt etmektedir. Makalenin üçüncü bölümü ise Türk muhafazakârlığının çözümlenmesini içermektedir. Buna göre, Türk muhafazakârlığının kökleri geç Osmanlı dönemindeki kültür-uygarlık tartışmalarında bulunabilir. Türk muhafazakârlığının yaklaşık yüz yıllık evrimine bakıldığında “Türk muhafazakârlığı”ndan ziyade “Türk muhafazakârlıkları”ndan söz etmek daha doğru görünmektedir. Makalenin son bölümü ise Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin bu farklı muhafazakârlıkları nasıl eklemlediğini ve bir muhafazakârlık biçiminin mirasçısı olduğunu gösteriyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Muhafazakârlık, İdeoloji, Pratik İdeoloji, Türk Muhafazakârlığı, Klasik Muhafazakârlık, Milliyetçi ve İslamcı Muhafazakârlık, Liberal Muhafazakârlık.

## **Introduction**

The meaning of the word “conservative” is difficult to define precisely. Conservatism has been discussed in many different ways, often with prefixes such as “social”, “liberal”, “new” and “techno” (Tännsjö, 2022: 2; Mollaer, 2016a). Moreover, how to categorize conservatism is also controversial. A review of the literature reveals that conservatism is classified as both an attitude and disposition as well as an ideology. Therefore, a study of conservatism must first clarify whether it is talking about an ideology or a disposition. Is conservatism a disposition? Is it an ideology? Or is there another analysis of conservatism that includes both of these?

There is a widespread literature arguing that conservatism does not exhibit the systematic characteristics of an ideology (Freeden, 2003: 87). Macridis' “state of mind” argument represents a very dominant approach in the literature (Macridis, 1992: 79). Accordingly, conservatism does not have the “systematic structure of ideas” that the term ideology connotes (Mardin, 1992: 13). It should therefore be considered as a disposition. Macridis expresses this judgment in his book on contemporary political ideologies. Indeed, a glance at the average book on political movements will easily reveal such an approach. Therefore, this approach reflects a dominant understanding of contemporary political thought.<sup>2</sup>

In attempts to define conservatism beyond ideology, a similar approach speaks of a “mind”, “mindset” or “mentality.” For example, according to Russell Kirk, we should examine the characteristics of conservatism by considering that conservatism is a “mind” (“conservative mind”) rather than an ideology. Considering that Kirk was a theorist who influenced 20th century American conservatism and an ideologue whose 1953 book *The Conservative Mind* outlined the contours of post-war conservatism, this approach is not limited to textbooks on contemporary political ideologies. For Kirk conservatism is a frame of mind that is radically different from ideologies such as fascism and communism in the post-war political atmosphere and should not be called an ideology. According to Kirk, the antecedents of this frame of mind can be traced back to Edmund Burke and can be summarized as follows: Conservatism is an idea with canons such as the belief in a transcendent order, a narrow rationalism, the mysteriousness and complexity of society, the diversity of the individual as opposed to egalitarian and uniform ideological systems, the necessity of a class structure of society for the requirements of social order, the close relationship between freedom and property, the virtues of tradition and prejudice, and the culture of internal development of society in the way of change (Kirk, 1978: 3-10.)

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<sup>2</sup> Macridis continues as follows: “Even if we were to define conservatism simply as... ‘situational ideology’-we would find that conservative ideology has its own logic.”

The best known representative of conservatism as an attitude in political philosophy is the British political philosopher Michael Oakeshott. In his essay “On Being Conservative” (1956), written close to Kirk, Oakeshott outlines the conservative position. Oakeshott claims that conservatism is an attitude. The conservative attitude is defined as follows: “To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss” (Oakeshott, 1962: 169).

The argument that conservatism is not an ideology but an attitude has also been supported by the claim of “natural conservatism” in the literature. This claim, made by the British conservative politician Hugh Cecil in one of the earliest works of literature, *Conservatism*, published in 1912, assumes that conservatism is the raw material of life: “(C)onservatism is part of the stuff of life itself” (Vincent, 2010: 58). Thus, from Macridis to Kirk to Oakeshott, the premises of the conservatism-as-attitude argument are laid out here.

To summarize, the conservatism-as-attitude argument manifests itself in three different areas: The literature on contemporary political ideologies (Macridis), advocates of conservative or neoconservative ideology (Kirk and Cecil), and contemporary political philosophy (Oakeshott). In fact, conservatism as an attitude is one of the characteristic assertions of Anglo-American conservatism. It can therefore be traced back to the very origin of this type of conservatism. Edmund Burke laid out the framework for this argument in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, written against the French Revolution and published a year after the revolution (1790). Burke criticized the perspective of the French Revolution as an ideology of rationalism based on abstract principles that rejected experience. Although Burke was referring to historical experience, he laid out the premises of the argument for conservatism as an attitude to be developed later. Accordingly, Burke's conservatism represents the concrete and experiential, whereas the French Revolutionaries' principles of reason to change society from top to bottom is an abstract and metaphysical program. Burke attacks the revolutionaries' program of abstract rationalism by asserting the principle of the complexity of society and identifies experience and common sense as virtues. One of the dominant themes of *Reflections* is that the ideological program of revolutionaries is a “metaphysical abstraction” (Burke, 2014: 8).

### **1. Conservatism as an Ideology**

Burke was the first conservative to equate ideology (referring to the rationalist political program of the French Revolution) with dogmatism (Burke, 2014: 92) and to contrast it with experience as a kind of freedom. Accordingly, conservatism is an attitude that is opposed to ideological rigidity by being based on experience. In other words, the conservatism-as-attitude argument, from

Burke, the originator of conservative ideology, to the present day, has generally been based on the view of the separation or opposition between experience and concept. This argument bases the claim that conservatism is not an ideology on its being an experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that criticisms of this argument also make this opposition a problem.

Michael Freeden questions this opposition in his analysis of ideology and political theory. According to Freeden, Oakeshott's definition of conservatism is "essentially anti-intellectual" (Freeden, 2006: 321). This anti-intellectualist analysis first defines conservatism as an attitude of doing rather than thinking and planning, as experience as distinct from concept, thought, ideology. Second, according to this analysis, conservatism is cannot be grasped by thought (Freeden, 2006: 321).

Michael Freeden's analysis of ideology assumes the "core" principles of conservative ideology as opposed to the literature that defines conservatism as a "negative philosophy" that simply preaches resistance to change (Heywood, 2021: 52). Freeden first identifies three levels of analysis of ideologies: "Genetic", "functional" and "semantic" (Freeden, 2006: 3). Freeden's "morphological" approach considers the self-identity of ideologies as the most important part of their analysis (Freeden, 2003: 51) and focuses on the core principles that construct the internal structures of ideologies survive, and on the continuity of "certain concepts in an ideological core location is necessary to maintain the identity of an ideology" (Freeden, 2006: 83-84.). At the semantic level of morphological analysis, we are not talking about an ideologically vague and amorphous position, but about a "conservative core" (Freeden, 2006: 332).

This implies that conservatism is not a cognitively indeterminate attitude but an ideology. In other words, conservatism is a political ideology that can be defined in terms of certain principles. However, even if conservatism is classified as an ideology, the question remains as to how different ideas defended at different dates constitute an ideological identity and how they can be defined within the same ideology. One of the most important arguments put forward to resolve this theoretical issue is based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblances." This concept refers to the common characteristics shared by all currents within an ideology, although they are not identical to each other (Freeden, 2003: 43).

## **2. Conservatism as a Practical Ideology**

We have mentioned two approaches to classifying conservatism: conservatism as an attitude and conservatism as an ideology. These classifications are divided between the oppositions of experience and concept, practice and theory, disposition and ideology. Can there be a mediating dialectical approach between or beyond these two approaches that can unify the practical and theoretical levels of ideology?

Although the approach that treats conservatism as an ideology has some advantages, it is insufficient to explain the practical level of conservatism. This approach encourages a critical distance from the approach to conservatism as an attitude that considers conservatism as embedded in spontaneous practices. However, both the existence of the practical level of ideology and the fact that conservatism is one of the ideologies that works best at the practical level, even if it is classified as an ideology based on certain principles, are ignored. The need to explain conservatism theoretically and practically requires a “theory of action” perspective (Bourdieu, 1998).

Although Pierre Bourdieu does not use the term “ideology” much, many commentators who aim to address the problem of ideology from the practical level have thought that his concepts of “theory of action” and “habitus” integrate the levels of experience-concept, practice-theory and disposition-ideology. For example, Terry Eagleton argues that compared to the theorizing of Louis Althusser's inclusive concepts, Bourdieu tries to explain the functioning of ideology in concrete conditions or on a daily basis (Eagleton, 1991: 156). For this reason, Bourdieu's ideas have attracted the attention of specialists interested in the theory of ideology, notably Eagleton and Freeden.

Bourdieu develops a theory of action to relate the practical and theoretical levels of ideology. The main idea of this theory of action is to move beyond “a false dilemma” to a dialectical approach by establishing the disconnected relationship between the levels. The dialectical approach Bourdieu tries to develop would offer an account of how a theoretical exteriority is internalized and how a practical interiority is externalized (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). According to Eagleton, Bourdieu's thought determines a “practical ideology” approach similar to Voloshinov's “behavioural ideology” (Eagleton, 1991: 50).

The concept Bourdieu developed to explain these two levels is “habitus.” Habitus takes the issue back to “disposition.” This concept is defined as “a community of dispositions” that values the material and symbolic in an undivided form (“the material and symbolic patrimony”) (Bourdieu, 1977: 35). Habitus includes “presuppositions”, “dispositions”, “structures”, “practices” and “representations” (Bourdieu, 1977: 18, 72). Therefore, habitus provides an argument for the transitivity between the theoretical and practical levels of ideology (Bourdieu, 1977: 78).

An effort to overcome the divide between theory and practice leads Freeden to think Bourdieu's theory of action in terms of the theory of ideology (Freeden, 2005: 242). Bourdieu's thought is useful in showing and criticizing the limits of the general approach that treats conservatism as an attitude. It is the concept of “habitus” that enables this (Freeden, 2005: 246-247). Bourdieu's concepts offer a perspective for understanding the functioning of ideologies on theoretical and practical levels (Freeden, 2005: 248-249).

### **3. The Core Principles of Conservative Ideology**

The dialectic of the theoretical-practical levels poses two questions. One is a question of practice, the other of theory: How does an ideology work? What are the basic principles of the ideology in question? In other words, if ideologies have an "objective existence" that operates at the theoretical and practical levels, how can the existence of conservatism be considered? By what principles does conservatism "work" theoretically and practically?

Anthony Quinton analyzes the secular and religious roots of conservatism, which he defines as "the politics of imperfection", and identifies a set of principles for understanding this ideology. According to Quinton, traditionalism is the most important of these principles, each of which is associated with "imperfection." Conservatism is characterized by a "reverence" for "established customs and institutions", therefore develops a hostile reaction to sudden and revolutionary changes (Quinton, 1978: 16). Traditionalism is one of the principles that Burke, who first laid out the theoretical principles of conservatism, mobilized in his opposition to the French Revolutionaries. In *Reflections*, Burke draws out the authority of tradition, which he understands as the wisdom of ages, as an antidote to the anti-traditionalist ideas of the French Revolutionaries. Tradition provides a natural safeguard against the limitations of reason (Burke, 2014: 90).

The second principle of conservatism is organicism. Although organicism is a deeply rooted idea that goes back to ancient thought, conservatism has given it a special meaning in the modern period. Against the mechanism of liberalism's social contract approach, which treats society as a mechanical aggregate of individuals, conservatism treats society as a living organism with its own natural development, in unity and integrity. Individuals are socialized parts within the organism of society, and the institutions of society are not artificial creations or external devices, but organic entities intrinsic to the functioning of the organism (Quinton, 1978: 16). In *Reflections*, Burke, the ideological father of conservatism, opposed the French Revolutionaries' mechanistic conception of society with an organic conception of society (Burke, 2014: 101)

The third principle Quinton identifies is "political skepticism." We can rephrase this as political skepticism against modern rationalism. Conservatism is a skepticism towards the notion of transforming society with principles (equality, freedom, etc.) constructed in the pure minds of isolated thinkers. In *Reflections*, Burke tries to ground this skepticism in a principle of complexity. Accordingly, society is too complex an organism for theoretical (or ideological) simplification to grasp (Burke, 2014: 62). A successful politics must therefore be based not on rationalism or theoretical speculation appealing to the principles of pure reason (Quinton, 1978: 17).

Quinton links these three basic principles to the understanding of “human imperfection”, which he sees as the building block of conservatism. In the context of human imperfection, conservatism faces religion. Therefore, although it has a different attitude from the institutionalized church, conservatism has a “quasi-religious” approach (Quinton, 1978: 19). Freedon identifies this religious dimension as the core principle of conservatism. Contrary to popular belief, conservatism is far from being a status quo ideology (Huntington, 1957: 454-473), because in terms of its core principle it seeks to develop a response to modernity. Therefore, “controlling change” is “the first core component” and “the core problem” of conservative ideology (Freedon, 2006: 332-333).

It is precisely at this point that the religious dimension manifests itself. In relation to this core, conservative ideology puts forward an understanding of religion that would not threaten social authority and order, but rather strengthen the organic order. Religion is a core conservative principle, although it has been defended in different ways in different historical circumstances (Freedon, 2003: 88).

In other words, the rejection of the search for rational solutions to social problems through the radical use of reason, which Quinton identifies as “political skepticism”, is also realized in conservative ideology through the theoretical and practical employment of religion. Noel O'Sullivan distinguishes between reactionary conservatism and moderate conservatism, which developed under different historical conditions, in a classification that is often used in the literature. On the other hand, he adds that what unites these two conservatisms is the theological assumption. Based on a theological assumption, Burke reduces the concept of revolution from the absurd ideas of some rationalist philosophers to sinfulness (O'Sullivan, 2013; Burke, 2014: 89).

In Robert Nisbet's (2002) terms, hierarchy is one of the “dogma”s of conservatism. Conservative ideology's understanding of social and political hierarchy is theologically grounded (Burke, 2014: 50) and operationalized in two main aspects: Class and gender. The oldest principle of conservative ideology, and the one that unites different kinds of conservatism, is the idea of the naturalness of inequality (Nisbet, 2002: 64). Burke passionately criticized the French Revolution's abstract design of equality. Conservatives believe that society has a hierarchical structure parallel to organic unity. The three basic conservative principles cited by Quinton operationalize this hierarchical and unequal understanding. Accordingly, (i) conservative ideology's traditionalism refers to the transmission of unequal social patterns, (ii) its organicism refers to the fact that society is composed of unequal parts in hierarchical relations with each other, especially rulers and ruled and social classes, and (iii) its political skepticism refers to its reaction to political programs and ideologies that attempt to overcome social and political inequalities with a political rationality.

Conservatism integrates its inegalitarian and hierarchical principles in the core principle of human imperfection: Man is inherently imperfect; societies are based on a “natural aristocracy” (Nisbet, 2002: 64) both politically and socio-economically; and efforts to reform and revolutionize society in an egalitarian way are doomed to fail (Burke, 2014: 50). For this reason, many conservative commentators have explained conservatism's legitimizing approach to social inequalities around the concept of property. Even if there is a minority within conservative schools that are skeptical of the free market economy (Vincent, 2010: 62), there have been groups that have been dominant in conservative ideology, defending private property as a guarantee of social inequalities and articulating with capitalism, albeit on different grounds than liberalism (Heywood, 2021: 62). Therefore, the articulation of neoliberalism and neoconservatism since the 1980s has not been theoretically and practically difficult (Brown, 2006: 690).

The other dimension of the social and political hierarchy principle of conservatism is gender. This has two interrelated dimensions: the family on the one hand and the social position of women on the other. Conservatism's defense of hierarchy and authority (Heywood, 2021: 58-60) also manifests itself in the idea that the social roles of men and women should be subject to a principle of hierarchy and authority. At the roots of conservatism, therefore, there has been a strong current that combines theological assumptions with patriarchalism (Vincent, 2010: 60).

Finally, conservatism has a perspective that sees the family as central to the establishment of society. It is considered as a functional social institution for the transmission of social values in terms of “family values” against the atomization and the idea of mass society created by liberal individualism. The model of conservatism is therefore the patriarchal family (Nisbet, 1978: 90).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in “The Family Spirit” Bourdieu states that the family, which develops around the family discourse, is the domain of “accumulation”, “conservation” and “reproduction” (Bourdieu, 1998: 69). Bourdieu does not refer to conservative ideology, but this model of the family is most strongly supported by conservatism.<sup>4</sup> In the varied history of conservatism, the traditional family has been defended in different ways as the nature of religion, the source of social order, “historic affinity between family and property” or the “seedbed of virtue” (Kymlicka, 2002: 318; Nisbet, 2002: 64).

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, feminist critics such as Carole Pateman and Susan Moller Okin have shown that patriarchalism has a much broader scope than conservatism and is not limited to conservatism (Kymlicka, 2002: 390; Vincent, 2007: 128).).

<sup>4</sup> For a study that uses Bourdieu's concepts to understand the formation of conservatism in everyday life in Turkey, see (Mollaer, 2023).

#### 4. Roots of Turkish Conservatism

The search for the roots of Turkish conservatism takes us back to the founding of the Republic of Turkey. Just as conservatism developed in the West as a reaction to the atmosphere of radical change of the French Revolution, Turkish conservatism finds its foundations in the early republican period (Çiğdem, 2003: 16). However, the discussion of the roots of conservatism leads to the late-Ottoman history. In this regard, Tarık Zafer Tunaya, who made one of the pioneering studies on late Ottoman intellectual life, defined the Second Constitutional Era (İkinci Meşrutiyet) as a “political laboratory”, which also guided the study of conservatism (Tunaya, 1996: 97-99). Studies of Turkish conservatism trace the roots of conservatism as a political idea to the late Ottoman period (Demirel, 2007: 219; Mollaer, 2016b: 69-77).

From a Karl Mannheimian perspective, we need to identify the historical and social conditions that give rise to conservatism as an ideology (Mannheim, 1991; Çiğdem, 2003: 15). Social modernization and the the development of public space prepare the grounds where ideologies flourish (Habermas, 1991). The most important changes in nineteenth-century Ottoman society in this direction were the development of certain social classes resembling Western European examples through the initiatives of a bureaucratic group or intellectuals close to the bureaucracy, the increase in the number of newspapers and magazines as mediators of social mobilization, the emergence of a certain readership, the development of a minority of intellectuals who pondered on social problems, the modernization of the transportation and education network, and the creation of new public spaces (İnalçık, 2006; Mardin, 2006.).

In the context of these social developments, it has been argued that, for example, the modernization movements of the Second Abdülhamid period (especially with the social integration it provided in the fields of education and transportation) functioned as a “proto nationalism” (Mardin, 1973: 176). From this perspective, it is thought that the ideas put forward within the framework of the mission of “saving the state” (Tunaya, 1996: 56) in the declining era of the Ottoman Empire provided significant accumulations to the mentality and ideology of Turkish conservatism.

It is in the debates on culture and civilization that the roots of conservatism can be found (Mollaer, 2016b: 72-77). Within Ottoman modernization, there were two different views on Westernization. While Abdullah Cevdet evaluated Westernization in a holistic manner and claimed that culture and civilization should be taken without separating them, Ziya Gökalp and Mehmet Akif approached the issue of Westernization in an eclectic manner and stated that a distinction should be made between culture and civilization and that “universal” civilization should be taken while preserving the national culture.

Tarik Zafer Tunaya mentions the existence of two different views within the Westernization movements: Total and partial Westernization (Tunaya, 1996: 151-196). In contrast to the total Westernizationists' attitude of "taking the West with its roses and thorns" ("gülüyle dikeniyile"), the partialists approached the West in a selective manner and argued that a distinction should be made between the culture and civilization of the West. According to the partialists, it is not the culture of the West, which is shaped by Christianity, but its civilization, the scope of which is determined by ("objective") concepts and phenomena such as modern science, technology and economic development.

This partial view of Westernization shaped a conservative attitude towards culture (and a modernizationist attitude towards civilization) and left a very crucial legacy to Turkish conservatism as a discourse and ideology. The fundamental relationship of Turkish conservatism with Ottoman modernization lies in the issue of culture and civilization. Classical Turkish conservatism has been a culturalist conservatism that can be used with prefixes such as "civilizationalist" and "modernizationist" (İrem, 2002: 87-112).

## **5. Turkish Conservatisms**

In order to understand the different forms conservatism has taken in Turkey, it would be more useful to begin from the assumption of "Turkish conservatisms." Turkish conservatism should be analyzed with a historical understanding that recognizes the evolution of conservatism and is sensitive to different conservatisms. From a historical perspective, we can speak of an early republican conservatism, a Cold War-era conservatism and a conservatism shaped since the 1980s. When categorized thematically, we can talk about classical conservatism, nationalist-Islamist conservatism and liberal conservatism.

### **5.1. Classical Conservatism**

Studies on conservatism in Turkey began to develop in the 1990s (Mollaer, 2017: 25-43). Based on the results of these examinations, it can be said that the milestone of conservatism as an ideology and political thought movement is the foundation of the republic. Accordingly, conservatism has produced a conservative modernization accumulation that accepts the modernization policies introduced by the republic, but tries to moderate these policies based on the basic principles of conservatism or to control the pace of social-political change. Classical conservatism has been a founding thought that has put forward themes such as time, tradition, history, culture, religion, social change, revolutions, science and rationality, and criticism of positivism and materialism (İrem, 1996; Bora, 1998).

Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884-1958), renowned poet and writer of the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, shaped the form of early conservatism sometimes referred to as the "style of peace" (Çiğdem, 2001: 61). Yahya Kemal's

use of “the future with its roots in the past” (“kökü mazide olan ati”) in his dialogues with Ziya Gökalp in the late Ottoman period, in a way, framed classical conservatism and determined the approach to modernization with tradition. What Yahya Kemal meant by this is an understanding of historicity that is in harmony with its past and that argues for a concrete basis for change through the reinterpretation of tradition. Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar defines this approach as “historicity” (“tarihîlik”): “National life is continuation. It is to change by continuing, to continue by changing. Because the first condition of creation is continuity” (Çınar, 2003: 88). Yahya Kemal also played a pioneering role in terms of an approach to “Turkish Islamism” (“Türk Müslümanlığı”) that diverged from Islamism. Turkish Islamism offers an approach that differs from Islamist universalism in that it localizes Islam and makes it “Turkish-specific” (“Türk’e özgü”) (Ayvazoğlu, 2003c: 421).

*Dergâh* (1921-1924) played a critical role in determining the themes of classical conservatism as an intellectual circle (Ülken, 1994: 375-382; Çınar, 2003). *Dergâh* was a short-lived journal published by a group of intellectuals during the War of Independence in order to provide philosophical and ideological support to the National Struggle. One of the dimensions of *Dergâh*'s significance in the history of Turkish thought and Turkish conservatism is the adaptation of Bergsonian themes to Turkish political history. Based on the philosophy of life of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, the magazine became a vehicle for criticism of positivism. This line constitutes the starting point of a movement that would later be known as “Bergsonian conservatism.” Bergsonian classical conservatives used Bergson's philosophy's themes of intuition, duration, and the life impulse; they interpreted the War of Independence as the impulse of spirituality against matter, and at the same time pioneered an alternative modernization against positivist modernization. (İrem, 2004: 79-112).

## 5.2. Nationalist and Islamist Conservatism

Classical Turkish conservatism was the product of a group of intellectuals who supported the developmental move created by the newly established Republic but wanted to control the pace of modernization in the field of cultural policies (İrem, 1996: 352). Since the years of Turkey's transition to multi-party politics, the language of conservatism has undergone a transformation (İrem, 1996: 357). The best known representatives of Cold War-era Turkish conservatism were Peyami Safa and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. Turkish conservatism actually intersects with nationalism since the classical period. *Dergâh* is also the pioneer of Anatolian nationalism as a special movement in Turkey. Anatolian nationalism, later developed by writers and thinkers such as Remzi Oğuz Arık (1899-1954), Mükrimin Halil Yinanç (1898-1961) and Nurettin Topçu (1909-1975), is a geographical and conservative nationalism that emphasizes the “homeland” of nationalism against Islamist universalism and Turanism, that starts Turkish history from the arrival of Turks in Anatolia, and emphasizes the values that

Turks have established in Anatolia since 1071. Yahya Kemal's concepts of "Turkish Islam" ("Türk Müslümanlığı") and "Turkish Istanbul" ("Türk İstanbul"), which aim to emphasize the values that Turks have developed "in this land", reveal the beginnings of the intersection of nationalism and conservatism. (Atabay, 2003: 515-532).

However, the coming to power of the Democratic Party (1950) and Turkey's entry into NATO (1952) led to the emergence of a quite different Cold War-era conservatism. In this period, the classical "peace style" of conservatism gradually eroded. Conservatism drifted in an ultra-nationalist and Islamist direction. Cold War-era conservatism was ultra-nationalist, Islamist, anti-communist and reactionary (Taşkın, 2003a: 187-214).

Peyami Safa (1899-1961), whose intellectual life was both in the classical period and in Cold War conservatism, is an example of this. Peyami Safa, in his book *Türk İnkılabına Bakışlar* (Views on the Turkish Revolution), written in the early republican period (1938), offers a right-wing interpretation of the Kemalist revolution against the leftist interpretations. However, in his writings of the 1950s, Peyami Safa takes a much more antagonistic stance against the cultural revolutions of the Republic. Moreover, Peyami Safa becomes one of the most popular representatives of the rising anti-communism. *Kızıl Çocuğa Mektuplar* (Letters to the Red Boy) demonstrated his anti-communism (Ayvazoğlu, 2003a: 220-229; Ayvazoğlu, 2003b: 527-528). Nevertheless, the Islamist emotional and intellectual trajectory in Peyami Safa was not intense enough to make him the pioneer of Islamist conservatism. The greatest representative of Islamic conservatism was Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-1983), whose influence continues to this day. Necip Fazıl is also one of the architects of a reactionary polemic that conservatives in Turkey entered into with the Republican regime. While classical Turkish conservatives gave broad ideological support to the Republican regime, Necip Fazıl paved the way for a reactionary response to the Republic. In this second phase, Turkish conservatism adopted a number of reactionary themes against the Republican regime, such as the proto-fascist "state of the supreme power" ("başyücelik devleti") and the "Great Hakan Abdülhamid II" (Güzel, 2003: 334-341).

Necip Fazıl's *Büyük Doğu* journal and *Ideolocya Örgüsü* book, in which he expressed these thoughts, had a profound impact on the masses who migrated from the countryside to the metropolis after 1950 in Turkey: "Until the 1980s, the dominant voice was the angry voice of Necip Fazıl, who was highly respected for being a powerful and 'accepted' poet, who had become a symbol for his years of struggle in the *Büyük Doğu*" (Ayvazoğlu, 2003b: 530). Necip Fazıl also made a vital contribution to the political thought of the founders of the now dominant neo-conservatism. The leaders of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) have expressed their admiration and ideological debt to Necip Fazıl on

various occasions.<sup>5</sup> Necip Fazıl is the most important ideologue, considered as an “idol” for the extreme nationalist and Islamist language of Cold War-era conservatism to reach today's political power and conservative generations. Necip Fazıl's ideas were the flag-bearer of the mass popularization of Islamic conservatism without even having to resort to any abstract program, and the transition from the more abstract world of ideology to the discourse of the masses. Necip Fazıl's affiliation with the Naqshbandism (Mardin, 1994: 189-213) one of the most influential orders in Turkey, and his traditionalism, which rejected all modern interpretations of Islam (Güzel, 2003: 341), strengthened the emergence of conservatism with an Islamic tone in Turkey. Necip Fazıl is the main source of reference for the contemporary stage of conservatism's articulation with Islamism in Turkey.

### 5.3. Liberal Conservatism

Since the 1980s, when Turkey entered a new phase of the “great transformation”, conservatism has also emerged in a new form. Conservatism underwent a change in these years not only in Turkey but also on a global scale. The new understanding combined conservatism with neoliberalism (Brown, 2019: 11). The representative of this trend in Turkey was Turgut Özal (1927-1993). One of Turgut Özal's first acts was the adoption of the “January 24th Decisions” (1980), which led to Turkey's transition to a neoliberal economic order. Turkey's transition to the new order was followed by the military coup of September 12, 1980, and Turgut Özal became the head of the Motherland Party, which was founded during this period and known for its liberal conservative tendencies, and after the 1983 Turkish General Elections, he formed the 45th Turkish Government and became Prime Minister. Turgut Özal also encouraged the leading publications and formations of the nationalist-conservatism of the 1980s, and at one point in his rule he even ensured that they were staffed (Alper-Göral, 2003: 587; Taşkın, 2003b: 387).

With Turgut Özal, Turkish conservatism has reached a new position. Turkish conservatism, which developed in the 1920s with Yahya Kemal Beyatlı and a group of literary thinkers around him, changed its form through two important ideologues, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek in the 1940s and Peyami Safa in the 1950s, and took the form of liberal conservatism in the post-1980 period with Turgut Özal and a group of new conservatives.

However, liberal conservatism owes much to its predecessors. Conservatism's trajectory of modernization in harmony with tradition was revitalized in this process. After Necip Fazıl, Naqshbandism found a strong position in the political arena with Turgut Özal. This closeness was not limited to

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5 See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-necip-fazil-bu-millete-ruh-kokunden-aldigi-kuvvet-ve-cesaretle-var-olabilecegini-gosterdi/2587391>  
[https://www.sabah.com.tr/kultur\\_sanat/edebiyat/2011/08/15/abdullah-gulun-necip-fazila-mektup](https://www.sabah.com.tr/kultur_sanat/edebiyat/2011/08/15/abdullah-gulun-necip-fazila-mektup)

a passive sympathy. The Naqshbandi leader Mehmed Zahid Kotku directed his congregation towards Turgut Özal in an attitude that combined the technical mind of conservative “developmentalism” with Islamism. Kotku's understanding would open a new “vein” in Islamist conservatism in Turkey and pave the way for Islamic elements within liberal Turkish conservatism to perceive “development” as “like worship” (Taşkın, 2003a: 208, 215).

The distinctive feature of liberal conservatism is that it consolidates all this accumulation with a neoliberal economic program that will transform Turkey to an unprecedented extent. Liberal conservatism, as in the US and Britain, articulates liberal, nationalist and conservative elements.<sup>6</sup> While declaring the transition to a neoliberal order with reckless abandon, it “combines liberal elements with elements of ‘traditionalism’ that are intended to be reinforced by signs of public respect for society's religiously traditional behaviors (the ‘failed’ attempt to legislate the headscarf issue that returned from the Constitutional Court and Turgut Özal's ‘publicization of Friday prayers’ during his presidency in 1991)” (Köker, 2003: 288-289).

Turgut Özal not only crowned Naqshbandism with economic liberalism, but also created a conservative background for the imperial neo-Ottomanism project, which was transformed into a foreign policy tool under the JDP. Ottomanism in Turkish conservatism, which dates back to Necip Fazıl's restoration and was revived in the 1950s (Ayvazoğlu, 2013a: 524), has since turned into a neo-Ottomanist policy with conservative influence. The cultural-political project that emerged in the previous nationalist-Islamist conservatism in the form of the emphasis on the “Great East” and the discourse of a return to the pre-Republican order was transferred to Özal's neo-Ottomanism by detaching it from anti-Westernism.

This is a major forerunner of a new conservative development not only in culture, politics and economics, but also in the established Turkish foreign policy, which will have a major impact later on. Turgut Özal made important statements on this issue during his presidency. These statements were made in a political atmosphere in which the so-called “neo-Ottomans”, a group of people who were moving from the slogan of “reconciliation with history and geography”, which became hegemonic during Özal era, were intensely debating and demanding that Turkey should have an “imperial vision” and put it into practice. During Turgut Özal's prime ministership and presidency, the “Second Republicans” and the pro-“Neo-Ottomanism” intellectuals who emerged as a right-wing form of the “Neo-Ottomanism” had shaped a new culture, politics, economy and foreign policy for Turkey in the years when the Cold War was effectively over. Turgut Özal also thought that this new period of the collapse of reel socialism created a new “opportunity” for Turkish-Muslim entrepreneurs

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6 For an influential analysis of how the hegemony of this new ideology was established in the case of Thatcherism, see (Hall-Jacques, 1983).

and the Turkish-Muslim republic. This, Özal said, provided an opportunity for the implementation of the “Ottoman model.” Özal's views were also expressed by Cengiz Çandar, one of the followers of Neo-Ottomanism, as a renewal of the “imperial vision” (Çetinsaya, 2003: 378-380). Contexts such as the “natural sphere of influence”, “Ottoman heritage”, “Ottoman catchment”, “Ottoman geography”, “religious brotherhood” and “new imperial vision” that emerged with the revival of neo-Ottomanism will be the foreign policy visions inherited by the contemporary Islamist conservatism. As a result, liberal conservatism has articulated the global merger of neoliberalism and neoconservatism with a Turkey-specific neo-Ottomanism and an Islamist politics based on Naqshbandism. Most importantly, during the Turgut Özal era of liberal conservatism, the pragmatic developmentalist legacy of the Turkish right (İnsel, 2003: 621) and the accumulation of reactionary Islamist and nationalist conservatism were carried to new conservative generations.

### **Conclusion: Towards Actually Existing Conservatism**

The neoliberalism of Turgut Özal era liberal conservatism is unique compared to its predecessor. Liberal conservatism appropriates the previous conservative accumulation and takes it to another level. Many elements of liberal conservatism will be fanatically embraced by subsequent conservative generations. The liberal conservatism of the Turgut Özal years was extremely effective in its articulation of nationalist-conservatism and neo-Ottomanism with neoliberalism, creating a new wave of conservative populism that embraced these “new age” traditions (Bora-Erdoğan, 2003: 644).

Nevzat Yalçıntaş, an influential name of Turgut Özal's years, was one of the first to make the connection between liberal conservatism and the current final stage of conservatism when he said immediately after the elections that JDP won, “I'm glad we have the JDP, if it hadn't been for the JDP, Turkish society would, God forbid, be heading towards a social explosion!” (Taşkın, 2003b: 387). Therefore, the main inheritor of Turkish conservatism from classical conservatism to nationalist-Islamist and liberal conservatism has been the JDP.<sup>7</sup> From the Democrat Party to the Justice Party, from Necip Fazıl's ideal of an Islamic city with “smoking factory chimneys” to the Motherland Party's neoliberal program, JDP has combined the ideal of capitalist development with an Islamic ideal of justice.

In the first years of its political rule on June 3, 2002, the JDP embraced a Turgut Özalist liberal conservatism to emphasize its difference from the Saadet Party line from which it had traditionally come. This early liberal conservatism of the JDP was also embraced by non-conservative “post-Kemalist” circles in Turkey in the name of restoring the Kemalist era (Aytürk, 2023: 23-32). In fact,

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<sup>7</sup> In another study (2016), I conceptualize the conservatism of the Justice and Development Party as “techno-conservatism.”

many in Turkey believed that the JDP was promoting the ideology of the “periphery”, which had hitherto been subjected to injustice, based on the “center-periphery” paradigm that Şerif Mardin had long ago introduced as a way of reading Turkish politics (Mardin, 1973). Moreover, from 2002 onwards, a template for reading the history of Turkey, outlined by İdris Küçükömer in his book *The Alienation of Order (Düzenin Yabancılaşması, 1969)*, was at work: According to this, the right in Turkey was on the left because it developed the forces of production, while the left was on the right because it relied on bureaucratic forces. After 2002, this Küçükömerian schema became a source of reference for the neo-conservatives. JDP supporters referred to their government in 2002 as a “government of silent revolution”, presented the JDP's promises and actions as “integrating the demands of the bourgeoisie” and, more importantly, defined this entire political program as “conservative democracy” (Yılmaz, 2006). What was interesting was the following statement in the summary of the JDP spokesperson's article we cited: “In the post-1990 Turkey, the inability of traditional political parties and official institutions to find solutions to the problems of the period... led to the 'conservative democratic revolution' in the November 3, 2002 elections, in the words of *Birikim* magazine.” Indeed, *Birikim*, the influential journal of left liberalism, published its first issue after the November 2002 elections with the headline “Conservative Democrat Revolution: 1946-1983 and Finally November 3 (2002)” and even hosted some writers who would later assume important positions in or alongside the JDP government. The political agenda here was clear: to support liberal conservatives against repressive Kemalism. More importantly, the interpretation of Turkish history envisioned by Mardin and Küçükömer was becoming increasingly popular: elitist Kemalist and leftist forces on the one hand, and populist conservatives on the other. It was in such an environment that the JDP consolidated its ideological hegemony. Although the layers of hegemony varied according to periods, they constituted a broad hegemonic bloc: Liberals, left liberals, Second Republicans, the Kurdish political movement and, of course, conservatives and Islamists who were anti-Kemalists from the beginning.

The JDP was quick to embrace conservatism. Putting on the conservative shirt while taking off the “Islamist shirt” was quite functional, because liberal conservatism had been linked to “development” since Turgut Özal, and conservatism had already ceased to be “reactionary” with neoliberal integration. Once JDP spokespersons found a “post-Kemalist” audience ready to believe this, the claim of “conservatism” could easily be put forward. Therefore, at a symposium on conservatism in January 2004, attended by the JDP leadership and its staff, the party's conservatism was proclaimed with the claim of “conservative democracy.” The effort to present this conservatism with the label “conservative democratism” was a message to the Western circles that followed Turkey while maintaining Özalist liberal conservatism, as well as to the

general Mardinian and Küçükömerian spirit in the country. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressed this spirit in the opening speech of the symposium, saying: “Instead of the sharpness of black and white, we have a more colorful and multidimensional picture before us. As AK Party (JDP), we attribute importance to the understanding of conservative democracy.” Erdoğan continued as follows: “Because we know what this effort means for the renewal and strengthening of politics.” Erdoğan then restated that the JDP was “a mass party based on conservatism” and addressed the masses in a way that encompassed the accumulations of all conservative generations in Turkey, from classical conservatism to the 2000s:

The issue is to have a political style and structure that will find a place for many identities without disrespecting any of them... A modernity that does not exclude tradition, a universality that accepts localism, a rationality that does not reject meaning... The AK Party presents the New Conservative Democrat line in accordance with the genes and historical codes of conservatism, but by leaning on the social and cultural traditions of the geography where it conducts politics. Based on its own tradition of thought, the Ak Parti aims to reproduce our indigenous and deep-rooted system of values with a conservative political line of universal standards. The Ak Party resists regression and degeneration, not change... The Ak Party emphasizes a conservatism that is open to innovation instead of the conservatism of the past, which was based on status quoism. The AK Party advocates a change based on evolutionary or gradual social transformation that operates in its natural process (Erdoğan, 2004: 12).

This program was a new conservatism, or “conservative democracy” as they called it, which took classical conservatism to a new stage, did not bring up the nationalist-Islamist Cold War-era conservatism embodied in Necip Fazıl, and benefited from Turgut Özal's liberal conservatism. It was a kind of ideological “manifesto” that was proclaimed to all circles in Turkey that criticized the “tyrannical statism” of Kemalism and believed that conservatism could be libertarian.

This conservative manifesto maintained its ideological hegemony for nearly 10 years with the support of the West and domestic anti-Kemalist forces. In contrast, the nationwide Gezi Resistance, which began in May 2013 in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, set an unprecedented example of social opposition in Turkey and criticized actually existing conservatism. As the Gezi Resistance gained a national character, the liberal conservative government was unmasked.

In 2004, the JDP government, which had been preaching liberal conservatism, became increasingly repressive and suppressed the resistance. Subsequently, the government's cooperation with the Fethullah Gülen sect, with whom it had collaborated to carry out its promises of “conservative democracy”, began to collapse - although they continued to cooperate during the period of resistance. However, instead of stepping back, the JDP's

conservative politics took on a new form of conservatism that put into practice different accumulations of Turkish conservatism. In November 2016, in cooperation with the Nationalist Movement Party (NMP/MHP), the JDP entered another phase of conservatism. Henceforth, the JDP's ideological line developed on the basis of an official nativism that was redefined through a reconciliation with Necip Fazıl, the leader of Cold War-era Islamist-nationalist conservatism, and the NMP.

The official form of conservatism in the 2016-2023 period bears little resemblance to the “style of peace” of classical conservatism. However, the society of Cold War-era nationalist-Islamism owes much to the rhetoric of secularists-religious, leftists-rightists, believers-unbelievers and the style of liberal conservatism. For this reason, it has frustrated even many groups that initially supported conservatism. While the JDP government is implementing policies that deepen class differences in society, it withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, which was adopted by the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 2011, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Decree No. 9 in 2021. Moreover, this official conservatism continues the conservative position on religious communities, from Necip Fazıl to Turgut Özal. The vacuum left by the Fettullah Gülen sect has been filled by other sects, and the state has been integrated with a political party that comes from an Islamist-conservative ideology and has become a state in a way unprecedented in the history of Turkish conservatism.

If we recall, commentators such as Anthony Quinton identified the principles of conservatism as traditionalism, organicism and political skepticism. The stages that JDP has gone through within conservatism, from being a “conservative democrat” to today, can be explained as follows: Traditionalism was monopolized through the suppression of different socio-political changes and different interpretations of Islam; organicism was emphasized through the suppression of classes, developed neoliberal policies and suppressed labor forces; it was even assumed that there was a self-religious mass that constituted the essence of the state in an organismic way. In other words, JDP has tried to reconstruct the socio-political organism in an exclusionary rather than an inclusive manner, and in doing so, it has excluded socio-political classes or groups that it declares do not belong to the organism.

Therefore, this new conservatism, for all its religiousness and traditionalism, is far from “political skepticism.” In fact, the real strength of this new conservatism is to apply the certainty of a moment of political decision that divides society into two along the lines of friend and foe to every appropriate socio-political situation. However, for all its traditional conservatism on family, gender or sexual orientation and women, JDP conservatism also reinforces a “nightmare” described by Wendy Brown. Brown summarizes his theoretical endeavor as “thinking neoliberalism and neoconservatism together.” According to Brown, neoliberalism and neoconservatism are two political rationalities that

can intersect even if they are different from each other. In other words, if we talk about the contradictory articulation of different rationalities in analyzing the actually existing conservatism, a completely different interpretation emerges. Brown analyzes the problem in terms of the articulation of different rationalities (Brown, 2006: 692-693).

Following Brown's analysis we can interpret this new type of conservatism as the intersection of two rationalities.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, there are religious sects that have become holdings and demand positions in politics, and their demands on religion, class and gender; on the other hand, there is a conservatism that contains the phenomenon of religion in its codes, but is integrated with capital in a way that no other type of conservatism has ever been integrated before. This actually existing new form of conservatism is a form of conservatism that can suspend even the minimum democracy and suppress libertarian or emancipatory demands regarding family, gender and social class for the sake of the demands of religious communities, in addition to "directing" the economy with a state-led neoliberalism.

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<sup>8</sup> An analysis of techno-conservatism points to this (Mollaer, 2016a).

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