

## **Boundary Work in an Era of Transformation: Television, Taste and Distinction in Turkey**

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This article examines Turkish television's "woman's voice" talk-show format, finding that it opens up a forum where women of rural backgrounds, who were formerly invisible in the Turkish public sphere, are able to voice firsthand the injustices they face in their family lives. Audience reception analysis of woman's voice programs reveals that whereas urban viewers reject the shows as vulgar and unimportant, rural-urban migrants celebrate the programs as indicative of women's status and thus potentially political. The article investigates the underlying causes of this difference. It argues that viewers attempt to negotiate their class position through cultural consumption, ultimately keeping the women's rights issues that woman's voice programs raise off the political agenda.

### **Introduction**

Shortly after I embarked upon a journey to conduct field research in Turkey in summer 2005, I was convinced of the necessity to study the immensely popular "woman's voice" (WV) talk shows that had dominated daytime television there since 2002. My interest was piqued by an unprecedented achievement of the WV genre: It made a previously invisible and silent group, namely, women from rural backgrounds, visible and vocal. More importantly, for the first time in Turkish broadcasting history the programs allowed these women to relate firsthand, in their own voices, their own experiences of domestic violence, marriage, divorce, child custody, relationships with in-laws, rape, abduction, access to employment and education, and so on. After a few weeks of audience reception research, a clear pattern emerged: Most television viewers I interviewed who came from urban and "republican" backgrounds dismissed the political importance of woman's voice programs and distanced themselves from them by denying any interest in them. On the other hand, viewers living in Istanbul's squatter towns reported watching WV with interest and assigned social significance to the programs. In the following months of my research, I explored the foundations for the vehemence with which republicans distanced themselves from these programs while rural-urban migrants embraced them.

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I argue here that the republican interviewees distanced themselves from the WV programs to deliberately distinguish themselves from WV guests who displayed "ignorant" and "backward" dispositions. Their position toward the programs can be considered *boundary work*. Boundaries between social classes "exist only if they are repeatedly defended by members of inner groups" (Lamont, 1994, p. 3). The "inner groups," that is, the upper milieu of the class structure, defend these boundaries most rigorously, especially in times of perceived or real challenge to their privileged positions in that structure. Pierre Bourdieu argues that tastes function as "markers of class" (1984, p. 2). The distinctive tastes and lifestyles that define the "dominant class," however, are subject to change and can be replaced by other tastes and lifestyles, given a significant transformation in the social class structure. Unchallenged in its hegemony over the Turkish economy and culture up to the 1980s, the Turkish republican secular elite has since faced new challenges posed by economic neoliberalization, Islamist mobilization, media liberalization, and large waves of rural-urban migration, as well as a more vocal critique of women's rights under republican leadership. This study illustrates that symbolic boundaries between "us" and "Others" are now defended more vigorously than ever due to these changes. Further, the republican elite's rejection of WV disrupts the potential political impact of programs that call more attention to violence against women, a theme I will explore with the help of the concept *cultural citizenship*.

In the first section, I will provide historical and contemporary background and discuss how historically an elite group with certain cultural dispositions was empowered to ensure the modern, secular character of Turkish society. The major transformations of the post-1980 period are weakening this secular elite and causing the tensions delineated in this study. The second part of the article contextualizes WV programs within the literature on talk shows (Gamson, 1998) and "first person media" (Dovey, 2000), introduces the theoretical background, and argues that cultural citizenship is a helpful concept in situating a cultural product, WV, in a political context. However, as I will illustrate in the final section, attempts at *boundary work* in Turkey's changing cultural landscape further curb the WV programs' potential to illustrate the urgency of the call for political and social action to reduce violence against women. I will show how boundary work is also applied to general television consumption patterns, as evidenced, among other things, by many viewers' claims that they watch documentaries. Here, the respondents' perceptions of the researcher also play a role, showing the need for self-reflexivity in social research.

### **"Republican Capital" and Neoliberal Transition**

The specific cultural undertones of Turkish modernization created an exclusive elite group who not only adhered to such tenets of the Kemalist revolution as secularism, republicanism, and nationalism but also adopted western lifestyles. I propose that in the Turkish context, *republican capital* had critical importance in the field of power until the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> In the first few decades of the Republic, cultural dispositions determined the class structure to a large extent. Urban, modern, and secular dispositions

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu argues that one's position in the *field of power* depends on not only the size of one's economic capital but also the cultural, social, and symbolic capital one possesses, the relative significance of the combination of one's capital in the fields one operates in, and the relative positions of the fields to each other (Bourdieu, 1996).

were favored, whereas rural, traditional, and religious ones were shunned and the pervasiveness of the "gender honor code" was ignored. The gender honor code impels the men in a woman's family to control her sexuality in terms of "chastity, having no extra-marital relations, dressing properly, conducting oneself according to expectations and knowing one's duties according to traditions" (Kardam, 2005, p. 16). Failure to observe such norms may result in an "honor killing."<sup>2</sup>

As a form of cultural capital,<sup>3</sup> republican capital impacted upward mobility until the 1980s. Before then, the Turkish class structure followed the republican/ non-republican line. However, a "problem of enculturation" emerged in the post-1980 period (Keyman, 1995). This problem is not peculiar to Turkey but has been observed all over the world in the "information age" as "technology-induced globalization," coupled with identity politics, creates new social movements and challenges for the nation-state (Castells, 1997, p. 2). Since the 1980s, fragmentation of identities and multiplication of discourses have been observed in Turkey in the socioeconomic, religious, media, rural-urban, and gender spheres.

### ***Socioeconomic Transformation***

From the 1980s onward, the Turkish class system could no longer be reproduced along the lines of republican capital. The abandonment of the import substitution industrialization (ISI) model of the 1960s and 1970s diminished the state's role in economic matters. As globalized modes of production came to dominate the world stage in the 1980s, peripheral small-scale entrepreneurs who did not share the same republican *habitus*<sup>4</sup> of the urban elites began attaining economic capital:

A dominant pattern of globalization uses trade-led networks whereby labor-intensive manufacturing takes place in decentralized and small-scale enterprises which are located in the Third World and are linked to large, brand-name retailers based in advanced capitalist countries. . . . The global proliferation of these sweatshops undermines trade-union organizations and encourages the rise of "ideologies of entrepreneurialism, paternalism, and privatism." Political Islam in Turkey has found a particularly fertile ground in this decline of traditional working-class politics and the rise of petty entrepreneurship. (Gülalp, 2001, pp. 436–437)

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<sup>2</sup> Although they are punished by law, honor killings are viewed as "justified" and necessary by the local collectivity. They are typically committed to maintain the family's "honor" in the eyes of the community. See Kogacioglu (2004) for a discussion of how the law played into the hands of traditional practices until the 2000s.

<sup>3</sup> See Bourdieu (1986) for a discussion of forms of capital.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's concept *habitus* refers to a set of bodily and mental dispositions acquired by each individual through their family, schooling, work, travels, etc. *Habitus* depends on the combination of forms of capital one holds, as well as the amount of each capital. *Habitus* classifies individuals into social classes. For more on *habitus*, please see Bourdieu (1984) and Bourdieu (1990). For more on my concept *republican capital*, please see Sanli (2011).

For the republican elite, one of the most disconcerting developments of the last decade has been the unprecedented empowerment of "Islamist" habituses in the economic and political fields. Although this article concentrates on the Turkish case, an emerging body of literature attests to the rise of a devout and highly capitalistic new middle class all over the Middle East (Nasr, 2009).

### ***The Rise of Islamism***

In the early years of the formation of the Turkish Republic, a monolithic form of nationalism was invented to deal with the challenge of controlling the Ottoman legacy of a multiethnic population subject to the power of religion. Thus "Turk" was established as an overarching identity open to anybody who wanted to claim it (Bozdogan & Kasaba, 1997). In contrast to the Ottoman period, now it was nationalism, not religion, that would bind the population together.

Atatürk's Republican People's Party (RPP) ruled according to these principles until 1950. That year, the Democratic Party came to power in the nation's first multiparty election, having solicited votes by appealing to Islamic sensibilities. As a result, Islam became an integral part of the public sphere again.<sup>5</sup> Political Islam continued to gain popularity with the emergence of the National Outlook Movement in 1967 under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. By 1974, the movement was powerful enough to become part of a coalition government under RPP leadership. The political environment following the military coup of 1980 created a new set of conditions that facilitated not only the strengthening of political Islam (Kushner, 1997) but also the "rapid enlargement of the religious field" (Şen, 2010, p. 61). Over the next decade, the military officers behind the coup found fertile ground for implementing the "Turkish Islamic Synthesis" (TIS) to restore "'national culture' imbued with 'Islamic values'" (Şen, 2010, p. 65).

The currently ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) draws on a version of TIS in which "Turkish culture, history and religion are held to be not only unique, but also superior to other cultures" (Özdalga, 2006, p. 552). This conceptualization assigns Islam's negative connotations to an Arabic essence and holds Turkish Islam to be more moderate and compatible with modernity.<sup>6</sup>

As Islamists gained wealth and political power, they became more visible in the public sphere—colleges, shopping malls, high-end hotels, and so on—as well as in the mass media, thanks to the "communication revolution" of the 1990s (itself a by-product of a neoliberal transition). These developments intensified the secular elite's anxieties over the waning of their power (Bilici, 2000; Göle, 1996; Navaro-Yashin, 2002).

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<sup>5</sup> Evidenced at the everyday level by the reciting of the call to prayer in Arabic, rather than Turkish, from the 1950s onward.

<sup>6</sup> This Turkish-style "conservative democracy," as executed by the JDP over the last decade, is increasingly being hailed in the U.S. as a model for fledgling Middle Eastern democracies in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Ghosh, 2011).

### **Media Liberalization**

Broadcast media were under the tutelage of the state-sponsored, state-controlled TRT (Turkish Radio and Television) until 1990. Although the 1961 Constitution set up the TRT as an autonomous public entity, over time TRT's autonomy came to depend on the ruling party's commitment to democracy and its willingness to let oppositional voices be heard, a trend continuing to this day (Aksoy & Robins, 1997; Sahin, 1974). For the most part, TRT shouldered the task of inculcating modernity among rural and traditional members of society by showing viewers a carefully calculated, official version of reality.

Commercial media became a de facto player in 1990, thanks to President Özal's liberal approach to the law.<sup>7</sup> Current affairs programs and talk shows thrived in this period. Prime-time talk shows like ATV's *Siyaset Meydanı* (Political Arena) and Kanal D's *Arena* (The Arena) were particularly successful in generating an environment for rational-critical debate of taboo issues (Aksoy & Robins, 1997, p. 1950) and attracted large audiences. Popular culture has also addressed previously taboo subjects since the 1990s. The most popular television series have dealt with topics such as women's child custody rights (*Aliye*, 2004–2007), the intricate relationships between the Turkish state and mafia (*Kurtlar Vadisi*, 2003–2005), and the imprisonments, torture, and executions before and after the military coup of 1980 (*Çemberimde Gül Oya*, 2004–2005). These series were immensely popular in 2005, when my research on WV was conducted.

The media liberalization of the 1990s gave ethnic and religious minorities (such as Kurds and Alevis), the LGBT community, feminists, Islamists, and women from less privileged backgrounds more visibility in the public sphere. Neither the phenomenon of media liberalization nor the domination of first-person media (e.g., daytime talk shows) is peculiar to Turkey, however (Dovey, 2000). Since the late 1970s, media deregulation and liberalization have been observed globally everywhere from the United States to the United Kingdom, from the Middle East (Sakr, 2002) to India (Mankekar, 1999). As of the 1990s, Oprah-style daytime talk shows began making formerly invisible habituses visible and formerly absent voices audible in the public sphere in places as diverse as the United States (Gamson, 1998), Bolivia (Himpele, 2002), Saudi Arabia (Sakr, 2004), and Palestine (Somiry-Batrawi, 2004). WV fits within this general framework of renegotiations of cultural citizenship occurring worldwide.

In 1994, the Radio Television Supreme Board (RTÜK) was established to monitor observance of "the fundamental values of the Turkish Republic" (Poulton, 1998, p. 62). Its nine members are elected by the members of the Turkish National Grand Assembly, so RTÜK is currently dominated by members affiliated with the ruling JDP. Turkey's human rights record under the JDP leaves much to be desired (Buğlalılar, 2011), given the country's growing number of political detainees (according to the Associated Press, 12,897 of the 35,000 people worldwide convicted of terrorism in the last 10 years were convicted in Turkey), of whom many are journalists and 500 are university students. In 2007, having won a second term, the JDP systematically began to weaken mass media outlets that were critical of its policies and forge close links with others that were willing to support it (Adaklı, 2009). Commercial mass media in

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<sup>7</sup> From 1983 on, Özal's policies showed great dedication to privatization and the opening up of the Turkish economy to the global market. Özal's support for private broadcasting can be seen in this context.

Turkey are subject to the same limitations as elsewhere, operating within an environment of new technologies, global competition, and government policies as well as forces of conglomeration, monopolization, and concentration (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, pp. 71–77). However, one cannot overlook the irrevocable change in the Turkish public sphere in the 1990s. Before then, the republicans had created an atmosphere where their lives were viewed “as supra- or extra-cultural,” as if they were the norm and all others aberrations (Navaro-Yashin, 2002, p. 216). TRT’s BBC-style paternalism regarded the public as ignorant and in need of modernization; hence it was to “be molded and tamed” (Coleman & Ross, 2010, p. 29). But with the introduction of commercial media in the 1990s, “the ‘banal’ world of everyday lives and voices, when commodified and projected onto the screen, proved subversive because it challenged the established cosmology of state broadcasting, revealing as arbitrary that which seemed self-evident and natural” (Öncü, 2000, p. 315). In turn, republicans began to be scandalized by the picture of the society the commercial media reflected in programs like WV.

### ***Rural-Urban Migration***

Rural-urban migration constituted another major shift in the post-1980 period. Whereas only 24% of the population lived in urban areas in 1927, in most recent estimates the urban population comprises 70% of the entire population. Although the economic growth of the 1960s and 1970s (due largely to the government’s ISI policies) allowed the migrant population to be relatively easily integrated into the labor market and absorbed into city life until the 1980s, thereafter it became harder for migrant populations to secure employment in the city. How the rural-migrant population was viewed depended on the socioeconomic conjuncture in each era (Demirtaş & Sen, 2007; Erman, 2001, 2004).<sup>8</sup>

By the 2000s, a shift that could only be called racist was discernible in popular discourse about migrants, juxtaposing republicans against rural Others. Columnist Mine Kırıkkanat’s article, quoted below, provides an apt example of the perceived cultural divisions between urbanites and rural-urban migrants. In this op-ed piece, published in the popular daily *Radikal* on July 27, 2005, Kırıkkanat describes squatter residents’ weekend outings at a city beach:

As the men lie around in their underwear while *ruminating*, the women, in chadors or veils, all without exception in *tesettür* (Islamic gear), are fanning the fire, making tea, or rocking babies on their feet or on a rocker. The same sight is repeated every ten square

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<sup>8</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, squatter town (*gecekondu*) residents were considered “the rural Other” with continuing ties and allegiances to their villages. In the 1970s, as “dependency theory” rhetoric took over, squatters came to be viewed as the “exploited/ disadvantaged Other.” In the 1980s and 1990s, following the granting of amnesties to squatter settlements on public lands and permission to build up to four stories on existing squatter homes, the *gecekondu* resident acquired two separate identities: the “undeserving rich Other” or the “urban poor Other” (Erman, 2004). Finally, in the 2000s the term *varoş* (slum) or *varoşlu* (slum dweller) emerged as a new othering mechanism (Erman, 2004). Accordingly, *gecekondu* residents are largely viewed as violent, politically radical groups divided by political, religious, and ethnic allegiances (Demirtaş & Şen, 2007, Erman, 2001).

meters. Our *dark* people are cooking and eating meat on the seaside, with their asses to the sea. You cannot encounter one family cooking fish on their grill. Maybe if they liked fish and knew how to cook fish, they wouldn't lie around in dirty wife beaters and long underpants, they wouldn't vigorously scratch themselves, they wouldn't ruminate and burp, they wouldn't be this thick, this short-legged, this long-armed and this hairy to begin with! (translation and emphases mine)

In reaction to the influx of "culturally inferior" migrants into the urban landscape, republican elites started moving into "gated" communities in the early 1990s. Ayse Öncü (2005) argues that moving into a gated community is a strategy for protecting one's middle/upper-middle class status. I conducted part of my field research in a gated-community setting. One of the most apt expressions of the sentiment of distance and distinction was a respondent's reference to living in the gated community as "living behind a fortress."

### **Women's Rights**

The 1980s also saw the emergence of a new discourse on women's rights as "independent" feminists began to question the rhetoric of the "state" feminists who upheld the official discourse that the republican revolution had liberated Turkish women, overlooking inequalities stemming from regional, ethnic, and class differences (Acuner, 2007; Arat, 2000; Tekeli, 1992, 1995). In this decade, scholars, activist groups, and other organizations first problematized the gap in the literacy rates between men and women; analyzed issues such as rural and urban women's access to employment, legal (non-religious) marriage, civil rights, and political rights (Arat, 1985; Ecevit, 1995); researched the prevalence of domestic violence in various types of households (Altınay & Arat, 2009; Yüksel, 1995); and critiqued representations of women in the mass media (MEDIZ, 2008; Saktanber, 1995).

The first instance of activism concerning a "private" family matter was the Women's Solidarity Campaign Against Battery in 1987 (Paker et al., 1988). Its outcome was Turkey's first women's shelter and information center, *Mor Çatı* (the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation), founded in 1990. Later, in 1998, 2001, and 2004, 126 women's organizations joined forces to pressure the government to bring about significant amendments to the Turkish Civil Code and Penal Code (WWHR-New Ways, 2005). Since then, the implications of the gender honor code have been more widely discussed in the public sphere than ever before (Arat, 2003; Kardam, 2005; Kogacioglu, 2004; Kuraner, 2002; Kurkiala, 2003; Mojab & Abdo, 2004). In the face of increasing media coverage and public outrage, the Turkish criminal justice system has begun treating honor killings more harshly.

Although talk of a feminist grassroots movement in Turkey has become much more plausible, there is evidence that one of the feminist movement's major problems is its elite roots and continuing inability to connect with the masses. One common characteristic of both state and independent feminists is their class backgrounds (Isik, 2007; Yüksel, 1995). As one activist in the feminist movement, Pınar Ilkcaracan (1997) writes:

[M]ost of the women's groups and associations formed during the post-republican era have concentrated on "helping" women living in the villages, instead of questioning the role that the Republic had determined for them as well as urban women. Moreover, the dichotomy they perceived between themselves and the rural women hindered their understanding of the problems and potentials of these women, whom they were supposedly trying to "help." (p. 6)

Absent too is a deep understanding of the patriarchal system and women's internalization of this system. Sahika Yüksel (1995) reflected on her experience as a domestic violence activist in the first years of women's shelter advocacy:

[T]he most serious problems arose because our feminist outlook and expectations, and our concept of family, were not compatible with those of the applicants. . . . Our principle of giving the individual responsibility for making her own decisions was considered strange and alien by the women, who were not used to deciding for themselves. (p. 285)

The top-down attitude some feminists display is also evident in republican viewers' reactions to WV, as I will show below.

The ban on the headscarf in universities, the parliament, and many other public spaces limits many women's access to education, employment, and political office. However, there is no feminist consensus over the desirability of dismantling the ban, and Islamist and secular women's rights activists have failed to forge an alliance around the headscarf issue (Turam, 2008). This divide might be rooted in the power struggle delineated in this article. Berna Turam (2008) has attributed the increasing polarization of secular and Islamist activist women to factors such as Islamists' urbanization, class mobility, and public visibility.

At present, the recent gains in women's rights are being undermined by the JDP's conservative policies regarding women.<sup>9</sup> In 2010, Prime Minister Erdogan declared that in his view, "men and women are not equal but complementary" (Belge, 2010). As Kogacioglu notes, the JDP's rhetoric and policy both seem to seek "solutions to women's problems in general and honor crimes in particular by asserting the centrality of the family" (2004, p. 132), an approach further evidenced by the party's emphasis on strengthening the family in a report entitled "2023 Vision on the Family" (Ministry of the Family and Social Policies, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework: Cultural Citizenship**

The work on WV contributes to the cultural citizenship literature pioneered by Joke Hermes (1997), John Hartley (1999), Graham Murdock (1999), Nick Stevenson (2003), and Toby Miller (2007).

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<sup>9</sup> I argue elsewhere that the JDP's emphasis on the family is due less to its Islamism than to its social conservative, neoliberal approach, reminiscent of American Evangelicals (Sanli, 2012).



The cultural citizenship paradigm helps bridge the gap between politics and culture by posing the following three questions, which are often left unasked by those who study issues of citizenship and political participation.

### ***The Question of Visibility***

Are certain segments of society excluded from the public sphere by being deprived of the right to represent themselves and participate in the creation of political discourse? If they are represented, how are they represented? With their vivid firsthand narrations of violence against women from victims' perspectives, unprecedented on Turkish television, the WV programs opened up a much needed forum for issues of violence against women and revealed the prevalence of the gender honor code and its impact on many women's lives.

To be sure, visibility cannot be taken at face value and celebrated as such (Dyer 1998; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). WV faces what Joshua Gamson (1998) calls "paradoxes of visibility" (p. 19). That is, *how* certain groups have been visible needs to be scrutinized. WV programs are highly commercial venues where social problems often are not placed in a greater social context but rather treated as individual scourges. The WV programs also fail to suggest solutions to their guests and audiences. However, it merits acknowledgment that this kind of visibility has, for the first time, allowed rural-urban migrants to participate in the national conversation on who "we" are and how "we" should live.

### ***The Question of Imposition vs. Expression***

The second component of cultural citizenship asks what kind of hopes, utopias, and desires popular culture imposes on television viewers (Hermes, 1997). What kind of cultural characteristics appear desirable in the mass media while other perspectives and lifestyles remain outside of mainstream discourse? The TRT monopoly in Turkey presented a hygienically modern version of society. Those who lived according to the gender honor code were not seen as "cultural citizens" of the Turkish Republic but as aberrations from the norm. "Blaming the victim" was common, if and when violence against rural women was discussed in Turkish mainstream media prior to the WV programs. First-person media (Dovey, 2000) are exposing violations of rural and rural-urban women's basic human rights more visibly than ever before.

Recent work by Coleman and Ross (2010) analyzes the new dimensions of the "public" in the first-person world of talk shows, reality shows, blogs, and YouTube. They argue that the emphasis has shifted from the BBC-style paternalism of public service broadcasting to an environment where virtually everyone has access to "persuasive influence" (Coleman & Ross, 2010, p. 50). Similarly, Graham Murdock (1999) has argued that first-person narratives and sharing of stories have a role in "fostering capacities and reciprocities of citizenship" (p. 16).

Though first-person media operate within the limitations of commercial broadcasting, they seem to create a new form of public sphere where the "subaltern" can speak more articulately (Spivak, 1988). Daytime talk shows create a "contested space" in which new discourses arise, challenging the expert

opinions that dominate the public sphere (Carpignano, Andersen, Aronowitz, & DiFazio, 1993). First, the audience hears firsthand, authentic, personal knowledge, rather than an expert's "objective" point of view. Second, talk shows put a "human face" on "general issues" (Gamson, 1998). Finally, as Anthony Giddens has noted, day-to-day moral decisions now occupy the sphere of the "political" more than ever, as tradition is no longer able to regulate them. Facing issues ranging from those pertaining to the body, such as abortion and genetics, to environmental concerns or the breakdown of the patriarchal family, people more than ever need a public conversation about how they ought to live (Giddens, as cited in Dovey, 2000, p. 168; Castells, 1997).

### ***The Question of Lowbrow Culture and Politics***

The third component of the cultural citizenship paradigm posits the WV-style lowbrow, popular culture as a politically relevant field. In my field research, many respondents distinguished between high- and lowbrow television programming and relegated the latter to political irrelevance. Similarly, theories of media and the public sphere inspired by Habermas' work on the public sphere commonly disdain lowbrow, popular forms of culture as distracting the audience from the "truly important" affairs of the state—taxes, wars, elections, and so on. Only recently have media scholars coined terms such as "democratainment" (Hartley, 1999) and "politicotainment" (Riegert, 2007) to refer to the political negotiations in popular programming like telenovelas, reality shows, prime-time series, and comedy shows.

In Turkey, citizens with little republican capital have been excluded, not only from the production of culture but from spaces where they could voice their concerns over their citizenship. In the post-1980 atmosphere of fragmented media, their contributions find more room and legitimacy. However, the social agenda their contributions propose has once again been ignored by the elite, who push it into the background even as, in an attempt at boundary work, they reject the forms of lowbrow culture that publicize certain important issues. This study contributes to the cultural citizenship literature cited above, which furthers Habermas' (1989) theory of the public sphere and posits "lowbrow culture" as a political venue. This study also further complicates the "cultural citizenship" paradigm by emphasizing the role of boundary work. In what follows, I will show how established urban dwellers (EUDs) distanced themselves from WV in an attempt to distinguish themselves from a picture of Turkish society they did not want to see, and with which they did not identify. Coupled with the JDP's social conservative attitude toward women's rights, the republicans' inability to fully understand gender issues renders women from rural and rural-urban backgrounds utterly vulnerable in the face of familial and other forms of violence.

### ***The "Woman's Voice" Research***

In what follows, I will seek to answer the following questions: What is the source of republicans' utter disdain for WV when rural-urban migrants find political significance in the programs? Even when they admit to viewing, why do republicans still feel the need to distance themselves emotionally from the shows? Why is cultural consumption so contentious an issue that viewers feel compelled to misrepresent their likes and dislikes to the researcher? The data presented here were collected in Istanbul from June to December 2005 during field research that sought to address the content, production, and reception aspects of WV programs simultaneously. I refer to the genre as "woman's voice programs" because the

format is fairly homogeneous regardless of the shows' actual titles.<sup>10</sup> At the time of research, WV programs dominated daytime television, airing every day of the week and lasting approximately three hours (including commercial breaks).

Although the focus of the programs was private family matters, issues such as women's access to employment and education came up repeatedly. The shows ultimately revealed the tight "space of possibles" (Bourdieu, 1996) that women from non-republican families were confined to: Employment is a difficult choice as it may cause dispute over a woman's honorable status. In the absence of meaningful employment options, marriage is the only choice, even if it means being married to an abusive, unfaithful husband. Also, the threat of losing one's children to one's ex-husband or in-laws in the case of divorce or a husband's death is very real, as the gender honor code imposes a patrilineal family structure where children stay with their father or paternal relatives, rather than potentially joining another man's patriline in case of the mother's remarriage (Sanli, 2011).

This article draws on interviews with WV producers and media executives (19 interviews). Also, 10 male and 29 female viewers were interviewed in relation to their television viewing activities in general and their thoughts about WV in particular. Participant observation in WV studios as the programs were being produced and observations at viewers' homes as viewers watched WV constituted other sources, in addition to countless informal discussions I have had with anyone who would talk with me. I categorized viewers in two groups as follows.

1. Viewers who came from urban backgrounds: Since this group represented individuals who (like their parents) had lived in urban areas all their lives, I coded them as "established urban dwellers" (EUDs). This group was more likely to display republican dispositions: for example, 10 out of the 11 EUD respondents (7 out of the 8 EUD women) were college educated and had worked outside the home or were currently working.

2. Viewers who were first- or second-generation rural-urban migrants living in squatter town areas: They are called "squatter town residents" (STRs) for purposes of this research. Seven out of the 21 women in this group worked outside the home, predominantly as domestic workers. Only 5 out of the 28 respondents in this group (3 of the 21 women) were college educated or currently in college. The rest of the STR women reported either not having been sent to school at all by their families or having been allowed to graduate only elementary or middle school (even after moving to the city).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> There were three WV programs on national television at the time I was conducting research: *Serap Ezgü ile Biz Bize* (Among Ourselves with Serap Ezgü) on Show TV; *Inci Ertugrul Sizin Sesiniz* (Inci Ertugrul, Your Voice) on TGRT; and *Kadının Sesi* (Woman's Voice) hosted by Yasemin Bozkurt on Flash TV. The WV programs are no longer on the air, mainly because of liability issues stemming from honor killings associated with the programs. They were replaced with a "safer" format: matchmaking programs such as *Su Gibi* (Like Water) on Fox and *Esra Erol'la İzdivaç* (Marriage with Esra Erol) on Star.

<sup>11</sup> The literacy rate, at 85.3% for women in 2009 (compared with 96.4% for men), attests to the continuing practice of not sending girls to school (UNESCO, 2012).

The 7 male and 21 female STRs were residents of two major squatter areas of Istanbul (Dudullu and Gebze).<sup>12</sup> The 11 EUDs lived in either established middle-class neighborhoods such as Suadiye and Küçükyalı or a gated community. The respondents were recruited through the snowball method and an e-mail announcement.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, two EUD and two STR informants referred me further to their friends, acquaintances, or neighbors, who further referred me to people in their own personal networks; thus I was able to reach a diverse population. An advantage of the snowball method was the ease of establishing rapport with respondents and engaging in candid discussions about not only their cultural habits but also the role of violence in their lives.<sup>14</sup> Having said that, it must be acknowledged that the snowball sampling method is typically associated with the recruitment of respondents with similar social characteristics. Although measures were taken to avoid this pitfall, the snowball sampling method limited the outcomes of the research.

The categories of EUD and STR do not overlap neatly with the categories of “republicans” and “non-republicans.” For example, many STR residents expressed Kemalist opinions and were open to republican ideals such as the emphasis on women’s education. Their daughters similarly displayed republican dispositions by being in college. However, the college-educated young girls and women who were squatter-town residents still displayed non-republicanism in the sense that their employment was contingent on their future husband’s and his family’s ideas about women working outside the home. The gender honor code played a considerable role in their lives. Thus, each respondent could be placed on a scale between republican and non-republican extremes. The closer their position to the “republican” axis, the more they distinguished themselves from the WV programs. In the next sections, I will provide examples from field research that reveal these attempts at social distinction.

### ***“You and I live in different worlds”: WV Consumption and Distinction***

I encountered only two EUD respondents who admitted to watching WV programs. One, Derya, was a 29-year-old woman working as a public relations manager at the gated community I studied.

I stayed at home for a month before I started this job. I used to watch woman’s voice back then. But *I’d feel embarrassed for watching that*. When my sister and her friends came home in the evening, they would ask me what I watched that day and I would tell them what happened on woman’s voice. We would joke around, laugh, crack up. I find the stories interesting but I would not watch attentively, to make fun mostly. I would watch thinking what I can tell my sister in the evening.

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<sup>12</sup> Using residential district as a “class” indicator is justified “because in Turkey the residential areas are relatively homogeneous and distinguished according to social class” (Özyegin, 2001, p. 225).

<sup>13</sup> Three of the 11 EUDs responded to the e-mail I sent to the residents of a gated community through the gated community’s e-mail list.

<sup>14</sup> Multiple STR respondents engaged in narrations of violence they personally suffered at the hands of spouses or in-laws. For a more detailed discussion see Sanli (2011).

Although Derya admitted her interest in the stories featured on WV, she also kept a clear emotional distance from the show. Derya believed that women's conditions were not as grave as depicted on television. As republicans often did, she assigned the blame for being mistreated back onto the woman.

Maybe it will sound strange but I think that everything is up to the woman. *Some let themselves get abused; some get beaten up deliberately.* . . . In groups with lower cultural levels, from incest to polygamy. . . . Women do that too. They cheat on their husbands with the grocer's aide. Then, when something happens to her, "it wasn't my fault, I was married early, it's because of my family," so on and so forth.

Derya's critique of women resonated with many republicans' critiques of peasant, STR, and Islamist women as "falsely conscious" subjects who *let* themselves be abused. The professionals working in television similarly referred to a strong sense of a division between "us" and "them" with regard to WV programs and the women who appeared on them. H.K., the elegant female program director of Kanal D, was one. She made the following comment on "Woman's Voice":

There are lives like that. This is so far away from me and you, I mean how can I know? Ultimately, *I live in another world.* But looking at these [WV] programs, my eyes are opened. These things happen in my country. How is it possible that somewhere a 13-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy are married? How could you know these things if it wasn't for the WV shows? You couldn't. There are women who are sexually harassed by their fathers-in-law. Women who suffer from incessant beatings, whose husbands marry second wives, who are deceived, exploited. . . . We were airing these things responsibly.

Süleyman, a 75-year-old male retired architect, was the only other EUD respondent who confessed to watching WV regularly. His interpretation of WV, like H.K.'s, indicated his surprise at finding out about women's circumstances through WV programs. His words revealed his less than favorable view of "our community" as well.

WV programs are not just women's programs. They're the programs of our community. When you look at that, you understand the *quality* of our society.

Like Derya, Süleyman was utterly critical of weak, uneducated women who "let themselves be abused."

All this happens because of the backwardness of our women, lack of education. . . . *It's the women's fault* to a greater extent than men's because at least men perhaps get *chipped* a little bit outside, when they're working, because they open up to the outside a little more. Women don't have a clue. Men try to control them, keep them under pressure. How? It could be battering, or other things, he'll find something.

Süleyman's choice of the word "to be chipped," *yontulmak*, was also telling. This is a common expression used in reference to "traditional men," likening them to a piece of raw wood that needs to be chipped into shape, that is, to be made modern.

While EUD viewers of WV engaged in boundary work by keeping a clear emotional distance from WV, the rest of the EUD interviewees' denial of any WV viewership was also an attempt to distance themselves from WV guests and topics. Clearly, some EUDs watched WV but did not want to report watching it. This claim is supported by ratings and interview data. First, ratings suggest that the level of interest in WV in the highest income bracket is similar to that in the lowest: For example, Yasemin Bozkurt's *Woman's Voice* on Kanal D did almost equally well among the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups (23.30% share for highest socioeconomic status (SES) "a-b" group; 23.90% for lowest SES "d" group between January 1 and September 19, 2005). Second, some of my EUD respondents, such as Sükran (Süleyman's wife) and Ayla (discussed below), initially reported not watching WV at all but were able to recount entire WV episodes in the course of our interview.

An advantage of snowball sampling was that respondents sometimes corrected each other, saying that their neighbor or friend actually watched something he or she claimed not watching. The reasons for the denial were investigated. As David Morley (1992) eloquently put it:

[E]ven if it could be demonstrated that my respondents had systematically misrepresented their behavior to me . . . it would remain as a social fact of considerable interest that these were the particular forms of misrepresentation that respondents felt constrained to offer of themselves. (pp. 156–157)

I propose that the EUDs' denial of WV viewership had to do with their identification of me, the researcher, as "one of their own." Janice Radway's (1991) romance novel readers similarly insisted on the "instruction" function of the romance novels in face-to-face interviews, although in the written questionnaire only a few selected "instruction" as a primary reason for reading. Radway argues that her respondents tried to justify and legitimize a cultural activity that they mentally placed at a low status and were unwilling to admit to the researcher that they merely read romance novels for pleasure.

EUDs expressed a general disdain for television in general and daytime programming in particular as "lowbrow" and "vulgar."<sup>15</sup> For example, the interview with Rüya opened with a cheerful disclaimer as a response to my question "What do you watch on television?" In response, Rüya said, chuckling: "Ooohh, very bad, nobody shall hear this!" Reporting what one watches or does not watch is a status negotiation.

Another illustration of an attempt at boundary work vis-à-vis WV topics and guests comes from Ayla, a 55-year-old gated community resident who referred to her domestic worker's interest in WV with the following words.

She listens to that [WV] all day long while she's working. Even though I try not to listen, because it really brings me down, sometimes we talk about it. Domestic violence is popular in Turkey nowadays. She likes those programs because she goes through similar

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<sup>15</sup> Many of the EUDs reported not watching daytime programming although they were retired and spent most of their days at home.

things. She has a husband like that who is an alcoholic, who beats her up. Therefore, the programs speak *her* language.

When asked directly about the WV programs, Ayla could not deny knowledge of them. But Ayla clearly also believed that her domestic worker's subject position was different from hers: The programs speak Ayla's domestic worker's language, but not Ayla's. Here Ayla resorts to a common republican discourse in which women like her (i.e., republicans) claim not to have the same problems as women like her domestic worker. However, domestic violence research unambiguously shows that EUD women are not immune from violence at home.<sup>16</sup>

### **"We like documentaries": Television Consumption and Distinction**

TV "flow," that is, what precedes and follows specific programs, makes up most of the viewers' experiences with television (Williams, 1991). Therefore the research also took viewers' overall consumption of television into consideration. Boundary work was applied not only regarding WV but also when viewers were asked about their television viewership in general. The roots of boundary work in cultural consumption must be sought in Turkey's broadcasting history. As explained above, publicly owned TRT carried out production for television single-handedly and, in the absence of competition, was able to maintain its highbrow content until 1990. However, as of the 1990s the emerging private channels began competing fiercely for slices of the limited advertising cake. A "mass production" logic began to take hold, rendering programs uniform, popular, and profit-oriented. Although many viewers (both EUD and STR) I talked with critically pointed to television's degeneration and corrupting influence on society, it was only EUDs who carefully attempted to distinguish themselves from the masses they believed enjoyed and demanded such distasteful programming. For example, upon admitting to me that he used to watch *Bir Istanbul Masalı* ("An Istanbul Fairytale"), an immensely popular series, 39-year-old male EUD Tuncay expressed surprise that something that appealed to the masses could also appeal to him.

Rüya's comments cited below characterize the republicans' strong sense of "we" and "others." Criticizing prime-time television's absence of current affairs programs, which she placed at a high cultural level, Rüya (age 56) told me:

When I get upset, [my husband] Ertan says to me "what percentage of Turkey do we make up?" It's true. Clearly, we don't make up that much of Turkey's population and that's why these [current affairs] programs start after midnight.

Ubiquitously, republicans made reference to their sense of "minority status." They considered themselves a "dying breed," outnumbered by migrants and Islamists. Now that TRT is no longer single-handedly presenting the polished, civilized version of society, their sense of extinction is exacerbated. EUD Rüya implicitly assumed that most viewers wanted to see things other than what she wanted to see on

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<sup>16</sup> Domestic violence is reported by one in every four families with an income of 2,500 Turkish lira (TL) and higher, the highest bracket determined in the questionnaire (Altınay & Arat, 2009).

television. She criticized the absence of theater and high-quality talk shows on television. Note her distinction of herself from the "people" and her description of what the "people" like as "disgusting":

I hate the [prime-time] talk shows, I think they're disgusting. All they [talk show hosts] want to know is: who dated whom, when. I don't want to listen to that. But we return to the same thing: *The people* are curious about these things.

The perception of the "people" wanting certain things was also present in the media executives' discourse. H.K., the program director of Kanal D, commented:

The viewers want simple things. They don't want to rack their brains while watching television. They want very "simple" [says in English] things in series, like poor people are poor, bad people are bad, good people are good. *They* like intriguing plots, but simple intrigues. I mean so simple that it would sound funny to *you and me*.

Here, a strong division was established between "us" and "them" and H.K. automatically placed herself and me in the same category. Also, a higher intellectual level was readily assigned to "us," whereas "they," the "viewers in general" were perceived as incapable of understanding anything but simple plots. The researcher's perceived characteristics as an EUD once again played a role in research outcomes.

Another finding was a perceived hierarchy between television genres: Watching documentaries, news, and educational programs was coded high on the cultural scale by both EUDs and STRs. On the other hand, watching too much television and especially watching series, tabloid shows, and reality television were considered activities of lower status; however, when an educational value was attached to such a program, its consumption was considered justified. For example, almost without exception, both STR and EUD respondents mentioned documentaries first when they were asked what kinds of programs they watched on television. The pervasiveness of this phenomenon was not lost on the media executives, either. As K.H., programming director of Show TV, pointed out:

Everybody says they watch documentaries. When you ask which documentaries they watch, they can't answer. It's just a way of *distinguishing* oneself.

In fact, documentaries are so unpopular in Turkey that when RTÜK fines a television network, the punishment is the mandatory airing of documentaries.<sup>17</sup> Viewers' reports of watching documentaries were attempts at favorable self-presentation based on collective mental classifications of cultural products. In

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<sup>17</sup> In this practice, when RTÜK bans a popular, ratings-generating program that has violated RTÜK's rules, it obliges the channel to air a documentary in its time slot, depriving the channel of revenue that would have been generated by the banned program.



this hierarchy, documentaries rank topmost, probably because of their pedagogical nature, parallel to the symbolic importance of teaching and learning in Turkish modernization. Many STR women similarly justified watching WV programs by referring to them as educational, informative shows. For example, Meltem, a 20-year-old STR woman, pointed out the following:

I think we young people have to watch WV programs. Especially young girls, so they know what's what. They marry at an early age, [WV offers a] lesson, they elope, lesson. At least she sees what's going to happen to her. . . . It's important that we know these things, especially us young girls. It's an example, see, you're 13, you haven't got your education, why [are you getting married]?

EUDs, on the other hand, did not find educational value in WV at all because WV showed them an image of Turkish society that they did not want to see, and because EUDs were unable to see commonalities between their lives and those of WV guests. "Your Voice" host Inci Ertugrul (herself an EUD) critiqued this EUD sentiment aptly:

There was a teacher at my daughter's school. She said to me one day: "that program doesn't suit you." She said that she found it—I don't want to say that word, but I can't explain it without saying it—"vulgar." Now, the people who come to our program, they don't come from space. They live to our left and right. Turkey doesn't consist of the few people we're friends with. *Maybe we don't like the picture that appears on the screen. But that's us. We can't deny that.*

### Conclusion

This article has analyzed consumption patterns observed for the WV talk-show format, where narrations of violence against women are presented in an unprecedented fashion on Turkish television. It used the cultural citizenship paradigm to highlight the importance of the programs and the issues they raise. The puzzle was to understand differences in WV viewership patterns among audiences of various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The analysis was situated in a context of social transformation in Turkey, where groups from Islamic and provincial backgrounds are gaining prominence despite a social stratification system privileging secular, urban backgrounds. It argued that WV viewership patterns can be explained by anxieties over loss of economic power and cultural prominence in this transformational environment.

Cultural dispositions are an important front in the struggle for power and legitimacy. Under neoliberalism, populist conservative parties have internationally enjoyed success in appealing to disenfranchised masses, even though their economic policies do nothing to empower (and much to hurt) the working class or the urban poor (Weyland, 2003). The appeal of these parties is typically due to the cultural affinity claimed between the party leaders and the masses. Along these lines the JDP successfully claims that Prime Minister Erdogan, with his humble class roots, is of and for the masses.

The battle waged via cultural consumption is actually over which groups have the right to occupy the field of power. One might expect the increased visibility of violence against women on television programs such as *WV* to lead to urgent calls for political and social intervention to prevent such violence. But on the contrary, genuine and thorough discussion of women's problems is still lacking in the Turkish public sphere. The concept of cultural citizenship helps to reveal the potential link between political intervention and cultural consumption, a connection that both political science and media studies have often overlooked. However, while taking the concept of cultural citizenship seriously, this study also uncovers a major challenge to the paradigm. Using an approach to culture inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, I argue that patterns of cultural consumption, as well as reporting or omitting mention of—consumption of certain cultural products, are arenas of class and status negotiation, especially in contexts like Turkey where the previous system of stratification is being challenged. In this negotiation process, the rare spaces that commercial mass media (like *WV*) open up so that acutely disenfranchised groups like rural and rural-urban women can have their voices heard are closed off, relegated to "lowbrow" status and therefore political unimportance. Consequently women's issues are ignored, not only by the ruling JDP's conservative government but also by the urban secular elite, who are the more likely advocates of women's human rights. STR and rural women remain the real victims of the economic and political struggle between the old and emerging elites.

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