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Contested masculinities and political imaginations in “New Turkey” and *Çukur* as authoritarian spaces of protection

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Abstract

Initially known as “the Turkish Godfather,” Turkish TV series *Çukur* (2017–2021) occasionally received criticism from government ministers and the government’s media regulatory board. This was surprising because Turkey’s and *Çukur*’s cultural universes converged around the masculinist protection of family and territory. So, why this political backlash despite the convergence? Wouldn’t that convergence of masculinity produce similar political imaginations? In this article we argue that in shaping the family and urban space, *Çukur*’s masculinities remain precarious vis-à-vis the hegemonic masculinity in “New Turkey.” Rather than being the society’s building blocks, *Çukur*’s families are suffocating spaces. At the same time, as opposed to cultivating neoliberal responsibility, *Çukur*’s familialism emerges as a space of solidarity in a precarious neighborhood to which state forces can hardly enter. Therefore, the neighborhood (*mahalle*) is not a space of consumption and surveillance but a haven against urban precarities. Despite their hierarchies and authoritarianism, *Çukur*’s men reject unquestioned political loyalty, conspicuous consumption, and entrepreneurship while endorsing the various impasses in family and urban life. Showing that absolute political obedience and economic dependence is not the only way out of neoliberal authoritarianism, *Çukur* confirms popular culture’s power in representing liminal spaces outside the state’s oppressive power and the markets’ commodifying logics.

Keywords: Masculinity; authoritarianism; popular culture; Turkish dramas; precarity

Introduction: masculinities traveling between popular culture and politics

The successful television production *Çukur* (*The Pit*; 2017–2021) was the latest melodramatic iteration of neighborhood dramas in Turkey. Initially dubbed the “Turkish Godfather,” the show is about a crime family (Koçovalı Family/the Koçovalıs) living in *Çukur*, an impoverished fictional neighborhood in Istanbul. Involved in lucrative illegal activities including arms smuggling, *Çukur*’s “father,” İdris Koçovalı, redistributes his wealth in *Çukur*. He gradually delegates his leadership to his second son

Kahraman, who is murdered in the first episode. This produces uncertainty about Çukur's leadership, triggering the stories of a national hit that lasted for four seasons.

Çukur is not a political show but it created political debates. In 2018, viewers released the video of an edited scene prior to the parliamentary and presidential elections.¹ In this edited video, İdris, while driving, receives a phone call from a man in jail. As İdris picks up his very old cell phone, we hear the edited voiceover of the man: "I will be released soon. My father is no longer İdris Koçovalı. The world is bigger than Çukur. From now on, Turkey is our home, Erdoğan is our father (*Türkiye evimiz, Erdoğan babamız*)."² The video ends with dramatic music as İdris immediately stops his car.

"*Türkiye evimiz, Erdoğan babamız*," alluding to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, soon became a popular graffiti on city walls and streets. The ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) officials denied involvement in the graffiti's production (TV Bolu 2018). While some citizens challenged the idea of inscribing "Turkey" and "Erdoğan" on sidewalks (Öncü RTV 2018), some pundits argued that the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was organizing a new uprising by framing the Turkish president as an authoritarian father figure (Say 2018). Other pro-AKP writers commented on the production of the graffiti in Europe (Özyar 2018).

We argue that the similar political masculinities of İdris Koçovalı and Erdoğan enabled the AKP supporters' political claims in the video. Departing from this instance of traveling masculinities between popular culture and politics, we analyze how masculinity shapes family and neighborhood in Çukur and explore the show's distinct political imagination. Situating Çukur within Turkey's authoritarian context that has entrenched conservative familialism and produced securitized neighborhoods, we examine the signification of masculinity in the seemingly similar authoritarian contexts of Çukur and "New Turkey," a populist political ideal for the AKP's cadres as they transform Turkey's regime.

We show that both Çukur and "New Turkey" are ruled through "a logic of masculinist protection," a concept that was originally coined to explain how the post-September 11 US security state demanded a subordinate citizenship with the claim to protect the nation against "uncivilized" enemies (Young 2005). However, despite this shared logic, masculine political imaginations in Çukur and "New Turkey" are radically different. The hegemonic masculinity in Çukur is now a precarious one in "New Turkey." In fact, New Turkey's hegemonic masculinity aims to terminate the relatively solidaristic, consent-based, and anti-neoliberal political imagination of Çukur's hegemonic masculinity.²

Çukur's plot

The show kicks off with Kahraman's death, upon which İdris has a stroke. Çukur now needs a leader. While the eldest son Cumali is in jail, İdris finds his third son Selim too

¹ <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6km9mc>

² Literally meaning "pit," "çukur" perhaps serves as a metaphor for some Turkish citizens' desire to leave the country. Yet, leaving "the pit" can be an ambivalent endeavor. The following lyrics from the show's "*Nere Gitsen Çukur Orada* (Çukur is wherever you go)" song illustrates the ambivalence of staying in or leaving "the pit": "You may as well leave Çukur but Çukur is in fact wherever you go" (*Sen istersen kalma burda nere gitsen Çukur orda*).

weak to lead. İdris's wife Sultan has difficulty convincing Yamaç to assume leadership because years ago during a crisis moment, Yamaç had rejected his father and left home as a teenager after he had to kill a man that took his family hostage. Yamaç is now a college graduate, rock singer, and a newlywed man to his eternal love Sena. He returns but is dedicated to leave after his father regains his health. Yet, he cannot leave Çukur again and witnesses the death of many, including Sena. Season 1 revolves around the real identity of Vartolu Saadetin, who has organized Kahraman's murder. Saadetin's real name is Salih, another son of İdris from a relationship with a night club (*pavyon*) worker. Believing that his father never cared for him, Salih aims to dethrone İdris and take revenge. In this, he collaborates with Selim, who doesn't know that Salih is a stepbrother. Selim, a closeted gay character, wants his father's recognition. At the end of the season, İdris leaves the neighborhood because he loses Çukur's title deeds to Salih and Selim. Despite dethroning İdris, Salih leaves Çukur with his childhood love, whereas Selim is depressed because everyone has left him after his betrayal.

Season 2 narrates the Koçovalı' struggle to regain Çukur's leadership from the Karakuzular (the Black Lamb) gang. The family ultimately wins but then is taken hostage by other enemies. Yamaç and İdris fall prey to a conspiracy, where one must kill the other. Stuck in a conspiracy, Yamaç unwillingly ends up killing his father but nobody knows this yet. Season 3 is about Yamaç's psychological hardships, as well as his troubled relationship with family members as the son that has killed his own father. This season also features the Erdenet family's goals to gentrify Çukur. Season 4 is about Çukur's takeover by Uncle Cumali (Amca, İdris's brother), who dominates Çukur with the money coming from his drug and construction business. Having escaped from uncle's torture in Afghanistan, Yamaç returns home and restores peace in the neighborhood.

In what follows, we show how a common "logic of masculinist protection" informs both *Çukur* and "New Turkey." Asking whether similar masculine contexts produce identical politics, we present our methodology and argument. We then discuss the "masculinist restoration" (Kandiyoti 2013) behind Turkey's familialism and urban politics. Then comes our analysis of how a contested masculinity shapes family and neighborhood in *Çukur*. In the conclusion, we discuss how *Çukur*'s masculinity remains politically precarious in contemporary Turkey because it endorses fugitive imaginations not captured by state-sanctioned forms of family, government surveillance, and commodified urban life. *Çukur* shows that there are in fact *multiple logics* to masculinist protection where loyalty and reciprocity trump absolute obedience, private ownership, and economic interests.

Çukur and "New Turkey": a common masculinist protection logic, different political imaginations

İdris's story is one of survival against a precarious urban economy. Originally from central Anatolia, İdris moves to İstanbul after losing his entire family. With Emmi (his right-hand man) and Paşa (İdris's next closest man), they become a trio of brothers, turning a swamp area at the margins of İstanbul into a settlement. His modesty and affectionate way of ruling make İdris Çukur's "father." We often see İdris sitting in his

*kahvehane*³ or selling fruits and vegetables in Çukur's farmers' market. Living a modest life, İdris instructs his family to do the same.

If modesty is one source behind İdris's legitimacy, his reciprocal and protective relationship with Çukur is another one. İdris considers Çukur to be no different from his own family and uses his illegal money for Çukur's well-being, feeding Çukur's poor residents at the food bank (*Koçova Aşevi*) and providing employment for them. In return, Çukur's residents protect the Koçovalis. If the police bother the neighborhood, they disrupt city life by organizing a strike in other parts of İstanbul. Between the Koçovalis and Çukur, there is what Göksel Aymaz (2019), drawing on Karl Polanyi, calls a "principle of reciprocity." Shaped by indebtedness and sacrifice, this "principle of reciprocity" enables mutual protection against the markets' devastating impacts. İdris knows he owes his power to the sacrifices of Çukur's residents. Similarly, Çukur's people acknowledge that the Koçovalis enable their survival in a precarious economy. This is most clearly exemplified by the fact that they accept the Koçovalis' holding of the title deeds for all property in Çukur, a bargain that sustains the logics of both reciprocity and masculinist protection. As reciprocity and morality trump economic interests, the Koçovalis and Çukur's people defend their neighborhood against the construction economy's selfish actors.

Like İdris, the AKP leader and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan comes from the margins. In the eyes of his supporters, Erdoğan is the protector of the country's subaltern classes. As in *Çukur*, the notions of "home" and "fatherhood" shape Erdoğan's political masculinity with his self-proclaimed identity as the protector of the orphans (*kimsesizlerin kimsesi*) (Sabah 2015). He is also seen as the international protector of the subaltern nations (*mazlum milletler*) (TRT Haber 2021). That is why the abovementioned edited video alludes to his occasional demand for restructuring the UN Security Council ("The world is bigger than five"/*Dünya beşten büyüktür*) and his criticism of the West (Anadolu Agency 2019).

That the AKP fans' video relied on *Çukur*'s İdris to make political claims about Erdoğan's leadership through the notions of protection, fatherhood, and home suggests that both *Çukur* and "New Turkey" are constructed through what Young (2005) calls "the logic of masculinist protection." Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, the US government led by George W. Bush mobilized a language of fear, promising to "make a home a haven" against uncivilized enemies (*ibid.*, 4). We extend Young's work beyond its post-9/11 security state frame toward the family and neighborhood as shaped by masculine protectors of two authoritarian worlds: *Çukur* and "New Turkey."

Leaders of both *Çukur* and "New Turkey" mobilize this protection logic, valuing family, collectivity, individual sacrifice, and territorial unity.⁴ Despite these commonalities, *Çukur* received criticism from the government bodies and ministers. The media regulatory board RTÜK (Radio and Television Supreme Council) issued enormous fines

³ *Kahvehane* or *kahve* in short are traditional coffeehouses frequented by men.

⁴ Although sacrifice defines both *Çukur*'s and the AKP's masculinist protection logic, the political ends to which sacrifice is put differ. There is no sacred existential crisis (*beka sorunu*) in *Çukur*, whereas Turkey's masculine leaders rule through such claims because politics is defined as a cause (*dava*) (Yabancı 2020). Similarly, the distinct necropolitics in "New Turkey" celebrate martyrdom and death in the name of sovereignty, as evidenced by rituals, collective memory construction, and popular culture (Carney 2018; Yılmaz and Ertürk 2021).

to the show's broadcasting channel for violating "Turkish family values." Speaking at a meeting on natural disasters in October 2019, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu said: "There is this damn (*lanet*) drama *Çukur*. If we do not have as much influence as they do, we're damned" (Gazete Duvar 2019).⁵ Soylu's remarks were surprising because *Çukur*'s masculine and family-oriented narrative is what the government has been after in its quest for cultural hegemony (Bulut and İleri 2019; Carney 2014; Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013). So, the question becomes: Can seemingly similar masculine figures, protective regimes, and authoritarian narratives produce different political imaginations? Do the hegemonic masculinities of *Çukur* and "New Turkey" automatically lead to hierarchical ways of living based on fear and obedience? Do we need refined analyses of masculinist protection and power as they unfold in popular cultural productions and Turkey's formal politics?

As the regulatory and dominant form against which other masculinities are hierarchically positioned, "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1995) suggests that there are multiple forms of masculinities in a society.⁶ Though useful, an uncritical mobilization of Connell's work can make scholars see "masculinity as a coherent entity, albeit a plural one" (Besnier et al. 2018, 841). Exploring neoliberal masculinities in a comparative anthropology project on global sports and migration, Besnier et al. suggest that "no particular masculinity emerges as hegemonic" (2018, 841) but, rather, that masculinity is in fact produced across time and space, operating at a multiplicity of scales. Their argument that "forms of masculinity that appear to be dominant in certain ways are in fact precarious in other ways" (2018, 840) is relevant here because *Çukur*'s hegemonic masculinity is one that the hegemonic masculinity valued, imagined, and produced by the AKP aims to erase. *Çukur*'s hegemonic masculinity remains precarious vis-à-vis the hegemonic masculinity projected by the AKP. Therefore, the dynamic concept of hegemonic masculinity partly fails to consider how seemingly analogous authoritarian masculinities are performed and embodied differently, ignoring how *Çukur* and New Turkey's seemingly similar masculinities mobilize different political imaginations.

In examining how masculinity functions in the Koçovalı family and *Çukur* neighborhood and understanding how it differs from the masculinities cultivated by the ruling AKP, we start with the assumption that popular culture can mediate, (re)produce, and challenge political masculinities (Hall 1997; Martin-Barbero 1993). In Starck and Sauer's formulation, political masculinities are constructed and performed by not only traditional politicians but also citizens and members of political movements (2014). Extending these definitions of political masculinity to encompass popular cultural narratives, we ask: How does masculinity function in the Koçovalı family and *Çukur* neighborhood? What kind of politics and power relations do *Çukur*'s political

⁵ Soylu's remarks do not necessarily mean that all the AKP politicians disapprove of *Çukur*. Yet, that RTÜK regularly punishes oppositional TV channels and television dramas reveals how this regulatory board functions as an AKP apparatus to restructure Turkey's cultural field. Regarding complaints about programs in Pro-government channels, RTÜK has followed a light-handed approach since at least 2019 (Şimşek 2019; Yeniçağ 2021). RTÜK is now also pressuring digital platforms to broadcast in line with national interests.

⁶ In emphasizing the plurality, contextuality, and relationality of masculinities, we draw from studies on militarism and masculinities (Açıksöz 2019; Altınay 2004; Basaran 2014), sports (Nuhurat 2018), family and public life (Sancar 2008), film (Arslan 2005), and political masculinities (Özbay and Soybakis 2020).

masculinities and family relations enable? In what ways do *Çukur*'s masculinities and familialism differ from those of the AKP? What does *Çukur* reveal about masculinities in fictional and real worlds shaped by authoritarianism?

Drawing on several iterative engagements with the show, we closely read *Çukur* from a cultural studies perspective (Pickering 2008). We separately watched the entire series (131 episodes, 120–140 minutes each), taking extensive viewing notes. First, we read these notes separately. Then, we read the notes together and shared reflections. For comparison, we coded our notes separately to determine the patterns in each other's coding. We then identified the emerging themes and focused on the most salient themes around masculinity, body, fatherhood, family, home, and neighborhood. To narrow down these themes, one of us watched Seasons 1 and 4 twice because they presented more patterns for analysis. Finally settling on family and neighborhood as the two most relevant themes intersecting masculinity, we conducted qualitative textual analysis (Lindloff and Taylor 2011; Tracy 2013). Our first theme concerns the Koçovalı family but also alludes to *Çukur* as a larger family. The second theme is on masculinity and the spatial politics of *Çukur* as a neighborhood. We provide snapshots of the scenes we discuss but have coded and examined only the dialogues rather than visuals.

"New Turkey" and *Çukur*'s shared "logic of masculinist protection" produces varied politics and power relations. Ruling with a prolonged sense of state of emergency since 2016, Turkey's masculinist regime mobilizes fear and demands absolute obedience in return for protection. Progovernment media circulate fear among citizens as to how internal and external enemies aim to undermine the government, citizens' political rights, and the privileges of clientelist networks (Bulut and Can 2020). That is how the supporters of the ruling AKP imagine the president as "the chief" (*reis*) of the "New Turkey," referring to his protector role. *Çukur*'s logic of masculinist protection, however, thrives through reciprocity and consent. There is one consistent message in the show: To rule, one needs to be an affectionate father (albeit with his flaws), not an absolute monarch. In S1E21, when his rule is challenged by Vartolu Saadetin (his unknown son Salih), İdris gathers his men in his *kahvehane* and says: "True, I have founded this neighborhood (*mahalle*). But I haven't forced any one of you to come here. Indeed, I haven't forced you to stay with me. Right? Tell me! Are you here by force?" The crowd responds: "Not at all (*Etağfurullah*) baba." İdris emphasizes his message that they accumulate people, not money (*Biz para biriktirmeyiz, insan biriktiririz*) and says: "There are no thrones in *Çukur*, my sons (*Çukur'da taht maht yok evlatlar*)." At the end, the show obliterates the protectionist logic when Yamaç redistributes *Çukur*'s title deeds to its poor residents, emphasizing that they are relieved of the reciprocally protective relationship.

Çukur's protection logic presents contested political masculinities with different political imaginations in two domains: family and the neighborhood. First, different from the unified family structure and the hegemonic masculinity imagined by Turkey's ruling elite, *Çukur* displays flawed families and contested masculinities. Despite being in solidarity with each other, the Koçovalıs do question fatherhood. With extramarital affairs, repression of sexual desire, interfamily romantic relationships, and criminal activities, the Koçovalıs have numerous "flawed" men including a rebellious rock singer, a closeted gay son, and an unknown son. While the hegemonic masculinity of contemporary Turkey is religious and abstinent, *Çukur*'s men consume

alcohol. Second, *Çukur*'s men refuse to develop *Çukur*'s valuable land with lucrative gentrification projects. Although some Koçovalı members at times fall prey to the appeal of money and betray the neighborhood, *Çukur*'s men ultimately sacrifice their lives rather than bowing down to greedy business owners and accepting to live subjugated lives.

Çukur does not present an egalitarian world. It is hierarchical, violent, and heteronormative. However, its solidaristic narrative poses a threat to the ruling AKP's disciplined, entrepreneurial, managerial, and conservative masculinity. *Çukur* foregrounds sacrifice, belonging, and justice, values that are displaced in "New Turkey," whose political investment is political-economic dependence and perpetuation of resentment (Yılmaz 2018a). Therefore, *Çukur* reveals the limits of Young's "logic of masculinist protection" by showing how different modalities of doing and performing masculinity can exist in seemingly homogenous contexts. It locates the masculinist protection outside the frame of the security state and helps us understand it within micro levels such as family and urban space as shaped by masculine leaders in the age of global authoritarianisms.

Masculinist restoration in "New Turkey": antigender familialism, securitized neighborhoods

Turkey's national context through which the protection logic works at the level of the family and neighborhood is best defined by the concept of "masculinist restoration" (Kandiyoti 2013). Due to migration, urbanization, feminist struggles, and neoliberalism, the traditional male breadwinner lost his material and symbolic power (Corredor 2019; Graff, Kapur and Walters 2019; Ünal 2021). To reestablish power through legal, discursive, and violent means, Turkey's "masculinist restoration" has introduced "a politics of systemic indoctrination, greater surveillance, and higher levels of intrusion into citizens' lives" (Kandiyoti 2019, 39). This section details how this restoration unfolds in two sociospatial contexts that have proven to be essential to the AKP's rule: first family and then the urban space.

To restore masculinity at home, antigender and familialist groups like Turkish Family Assembly (*Türkiye Aile Meclisi*) draw from the government's essentializing statements about how women are "natural mothers" and any woman who is not a mother is "deficient." These groups capitalize on the AKP's "simultaneously all-powerful and always threatened" masculinity with narratives of victimization and various national and international threats (Gökarıksel, Neubert and Smith 2019, 567). Fueled by such discursive constructions, they aim to lift the ban on underage marriages, reenact the "head of the family" status in the Civil Code, and open women's right to alimony to debate (Ünal 2021, 72–76). The political impact of these interventions cannot be overstated. According to data provided by the main opposition CHP and the "We Will Stop Femicide Platform" (*Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu*) more than 8,000 women were murdered during the AKP rule (Gazete Duvar, 2020). In March 2021, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, having been its first signatory in 2011.⁷

⁷ The Convention has been vital to prevent domestic violence and violence against women, internationally highlighting the state's responsibilities in these realms. It promotes developing measures and

This withdrawal is the culmination of other regulatory moves by the government in the last decade as all social policies in Turkey have been redefined as “family policy” (Yazıcı 2012). Coming to power after the 2001 economic crisis, the AKP has recast economic problems as problems of household management and lack of moral discipline related to a “crisis of families” (Yılmaz 2015), claiming that strong families make a strong nation (Can 2019; Kandiyoti 2016; Öztan 2018). In the name of protecting the family, the AKP has literally dropped the name “woman” at the highest institutional levels. In 2011, State Ministry for Women and the Family (*Kadın ve Aileden Sorumlu Devlet Bakanlığı*) was closed and replaced with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies. This ministry was then merged with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security in 2018 but was later separated again to ultimately become the Ministry of Family and Social Services. While the connection of woman to the family back in 2011 did have a patriarchal logic, the term “woman” has been erased from the ministry’s name. Thriving through a “patronizing spectacle of power that manipulates disappointments, despair and social depression” (Öztan 2021), institutional moves to cultivate familialism abound. Family advice centers, family education programs, projects like My Family Turkey (*Ailem Türkiye*) and Becoming a Family (*Aile Olmak*) aim “to make the state/society more like a family and family more like the state/society” (Yılmaz 2018b, 156). With its Family Guidance and Counseling Offices (*Aile İrşat ve Rehberlik Büroları*) and Religious Counselling Offices (*Dini Rehberlik Büroları*), the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) has also enabled Turkey’s masculinist restoration and familialism (Öztan 2021).

Aside from the family, the AKP’s masculinist restoration targets the urban space. Documenting the politics of community policing in Turkey, Hayal Akarsu argues that the seemingly neutral and liberal practice of community policing ends up controlling neighborhoods and women in the name of peace (“*huzur*”) (Akarsu 2020). Discourses of responsible citizenship cultivate “state-sponsored vigilantism” whereas Çukur’s vigilantism rejects police intervention (ibid., 28). Furthermore, masculinity has been essential to the spectacular transformation and marketing of the urban space. For instance, performing “the crudest version of hegemonic masculinity,” the Turkish construction tycoon Ali Ağaoğlu manufactures “a realizable fantasy for his clients” in his commercials (Baydar and Karakız 2017, 193). Becoming a celebrity figure with his financial growth during the AKP era, he presents himself as a Godlike figure, displaying the desire for urban wealth and home ownership amidst a masculine playground defined by his alleged popularity among women and his conspicuous ownership of luxurious cars (Bulut, Can and İleri 2020). Although not the first and only one, Ankara’s Çukurambar district, for instance, presents a peculiar case of *gece-kondu* renewal where the AKP members moved from their parliamentary housing to the area, triggering urban transformation. Iconographic of “New Turkey,” Çukurambar displays the masculine desires of Islamic conservatives for whom consumption is not waste but “a kind of new investment in the business world and a necessity to keep up with the social circle” (Akçaoğlu 2021, 12). Ultimately, the

policies to prevent domestic violence, encourages international collaboration, and highlights gender equality, while also including important definitions such as sexual orientation, gender-based discrimination, and violence.

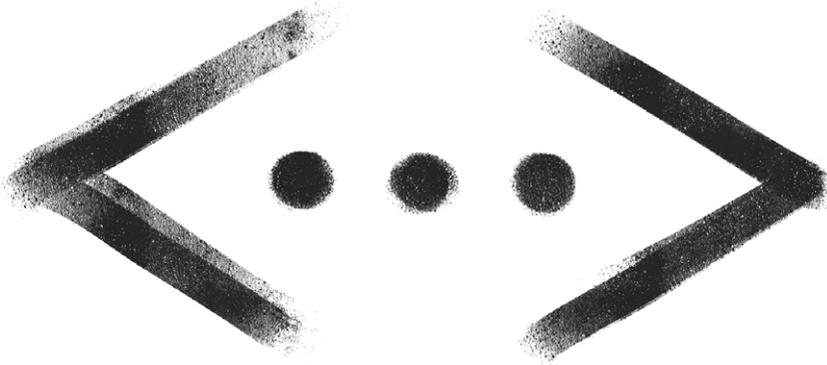


Figure 1. *Çukur* tattoo.

hegemonic masculinity in the AKP regime imagines neighborhoods as spaces of spectacular display, consumption, and surveillance.⁸

Having contextualized how Turkey's masculinist protection regime works at the domestic and urban level, we now analyze how a contested masculinity is at work in *Çukur* as far as family and neighborhood are concerned.

Masculinity in the Koçovalı family: strong but contested

The masculinist logic of protection shaping the Koçovalıs is visible through *Çukur*'s nationally and transnationally famous tattoo inscribed on the show's characters' bodies and *Çukur*'s streets (Figure 1).

The tattoo signifies men's protective roles in different contexts. We learn this from side characters, who explain it to neighborhood kids. In S1E33, İdris's right-hand man Emmi describes the tattoo to little Yamaç: "At the top is a roof. If you are in trouble and escaping, immediately come back to the neighborhood. Ring the bells of any house, show them your tattoo. That's it. The roof of that house is also your roof." Then the neighborhood's barber takes it up from Emmi. "The first dot right below the roof represents the immediate family that a *man* has to protect," says the barber, while giving his own son the tattoo. From this scene, Metin, one of İdris's men, takes over as he talks to young kids. The dot in the middle is the external family, "your blood brothers, partners, *the men* with whom you have the same goal. They will stand in front of bullets for you if necessary. You do the same if necessary," explains Metin to underscore sacrifice in building a brotherhood. Metin's brother Kemal explains the final dot to other kids: "The final dot at the bottom is your largest family: The Koçovalıs. Once you have this tattoo, they become your parents, grandparents,

⁸ The production of such neighborhoods has commercialized and transformed political subjectivities. The AKP's informal networks of aid provision and municipality-based formal welfare distribution practices have targeted the emotional worlds of the urban poor by transforming aid to a hierarchical relationship of indebtedness (Yılmaz 2018b; Yoltar 2020; Yüksek 2010), while securing election wins since 2002 (Buğra 2020). Together with fear, this relationship of indebtedness enables the logic of masculinist protection through the embodied figure of "the chief" to whom citizens owe their well-being. Here, the protector demands obedience from the marginalized, who are no longer citizens but indebted subjects.

brothers, sisters, aunts. They protect you. They will provide for you. You love and respect them.” The scene concludes with little Yamaç asking Emmi: “Then I have a lot of uncles and grandfathers, right?”

Indeed, overlapping levels of kinships sustain the masculinist protection. First, there is the blood kinship of the immediate family. Then, there is a criminal kinship comprised of men ready to die for each other. Finally, a fictive kinship brings everyone together under İdris’s leadership. The home for this fictive kinship is “Çukur” (the pit) exemplified by the last drawing at the bottom of the tattoo. Emmi says: “Everyone has a home (*yuva*) in this life. Ours is Çukur. As long as there is a roof on top of our heads, a pit below our feet, and our family in between, there is no death to us. Once you have the tattoo, even if you leave Çukur one day, Çukur will not leave you.”

Although İdris is the “father” of Çukur, he is first the father of the Koçovalis. For him, the family is a red line. When his second son Kahraman is murdered, İdris has a stroke. When he regains consciousness, he refuses to talk to Selim, because Selim failed to protect Kahraman. İdris criticizes Selim by underscoring a man’s protective role in the family:

Family is everything. If your family is not with you, you are nothing. You are nobody unless your family is behind you. They are your hands, arms, legs. They are the ones that kick your enemies. They pull the trigger. You think you pulled it. You shot somebody. Your family protects you when necessary. And you do the same. You know this better than me.

İdris ends his remarks by saying “You know this better than me” to remind Yamaç of his first murder after which he left the house. This had forced Yamaç to end his relationship with his dad but İdris also had problems with his other sons. Cumali, the eldest son, is in jail. İdris never seems to have liked Selim due to his timid personality. İdris does not even know that Salih exists.

The storylines of *Çukur*’s women mostly comply with the masculinist protection regime. When Kahraman is murdered, İdris’s wife Sultan reprimands Selim for crying: “Stop it. We do not display our sorrow.” In S1E10, when Yamaç’s first wife Sena has conflicts with Sultan after moving in with the Koçovalis, she tells Sultan that “another way of life is possible.” For Sultan, the protection regime is inevitable: “No, it is not possible and you do not understand it.” When Sultan intrusively wants to enter to examine her and Yamaç’s bedroom (S1E8), Sena stands right in front of her. When Sultan calls her “bride! (*gelin!*)” she says: “I have a name, Sena. This is my private space.” In other seasons, we see Cumali’s wife Damla using a gun or telling Cumali to “shut up.” Yamaç’s niece Karaca is a reckless teenager, who oversees Çukur on roofs. Yamaç’s third partner Efsun is a powerful woman involved in the conspiracy that forces Yamaç to kill İdris. These do not make *Çukur* a feminist drama by any means but reveal that women intermittently deepen cracks in the protection regime with their acts. They do not overthrow the protection regime but bargain with the men to expand their own power.

A sharp statement contesting the Koçovalis’ protection regime comes from Aliço, a man unloved not only by his biological father but also by the Paternal State (*Devlet Baba*). Aliço was a commando and suffers from PTSD, implying that his sacrifice was for the cause of nationalism. With no family except Çukur, Aliço’s story reveals the

political fault lines in Turkey's masculinist protection regime, where the male protectors find themselves unprotected and disposable (Açıksöz 2019). The Koçovalis keep an eye on this genius man, a precarious recycling worker that can memorize all information he encounters. In S2E16, when Yamaç is in intensive care, he sees Aliço in his dream, which is a reminder of the brutality and vanity of the masculinist protection regime:

Aliço: Çukur is our home, Yamaç is Çukur's father. Do you know what this place was at the very beginning, baby?

Yamaç: Swamp. My father drained all of it. Planted trees, built houses.

Aliço: Bravo, good job. So, how did he fill it with? With dead bodies, corpses. Corpses . . . You're living on top of a giant cemetery. Isn't that strange? On top of that giant cemetery grew a giant plane tree, you, the Koçovalis. In your family roots, there is death. In your own roots, there is death. If there is death in your roots, then there will be death in your branches, leaves, and fruits too. . . . There will always be blood on these streets.

Aliço challenges both the logic of sacrifice and the Koçovalis' masculine protection regime that produces nothing but corpses. This dream is a reminder to Yamaç regarding how he would live his future life. Later, Yamaç and Aliço arrive at İdris's *kahvehane*, seeing İdris wiping blood out of the street. İdris confesses to Yamaç that the blood "won't be wiped out," revealing the problems with the masculinist protection regime.

In this key dream scene, Yamaç also encounters Meliha, İdris's eternal love from his youth. The encounter is in a cemetery, full of deceased Koçovalis including Yamaç. Highlighting that protection sustains itself through sacrifices, Meliha asks Yamaç: "Are you sure you want to continue this?" Echoing Aliço, this scene warns Yamaç about the human costs of the masculinist protection regime, ultimately contesting İdris's fatherhood and the Koçovalis' leadership (Figure 2).

Immediate family members also challenge İdris's fatherhood, sometimes to the extent that they send him away from Çukur. After ending İdris's rule in Çukur at the end of Season 1, Selim asks his dad:

Why did you not ever want me? Fine, I was weak. I got sick a lot when I was a kid. I am a coward. Maybe I would never become the son you wanted. Still, I didn't come out of the blue. I am also of your blood. A parent would even love his kid just for this. You will love your son, İdris Koçovalı. Whether he obeys you or not. Whether he is how you want him or not.

In Season 2, Selim is excluded from the family. After facing the social outcomes of betrayal, he is pardoned and accepted back into the family. In S2E18, he makes another bad decision. İdris is upset but calmly questions Selim's reasoning. Selim says he acted the way he did because another option was not viable. For him, his actions did not matter because his brothers would not even listen to him, especially after his past betrayal. İdris tells Selim to stand by his actions no matter how wrong they are:



Figure 2. Yamaç's dream in the cemetery.

We didn't pardon you. Ok, but see, you're still here, *lan* (buddy). Your mom, dad, brothers, wife, children It seems that we all have our flaws because we do not speak up. . . . Remember you once asked me why I don't love you? It's not that I don't love you. It's just I don't love my own flaws. A man does not want to see his own flaws, let alone love them. He wants to hide the weaknesses. . . . You think it's just you that lies, and I am an honest person? You think you are scared and I am not? Don't pity yourself. You are my son. You make others listen to you. And love your flaws. The flaw belongs to you. You are the flaw (*Araz da senden, araz da sensin*) (Figure 3).

İdris's confession to Selim that he is also scared and his encouragement about accepting one's "flaws" (*araz*) attests to the contested nature of a fragile masculinity among the Koçovalis, where men frequently cry together. As an authoritarian figure, İdris surely protects the family and Çukur at the expense of corpses. At the same time, İdris is aware of his sins and flaws, while still defending these flaws in the name of masculinity. However, despite being an authoritarian figure, İdris is not a despot. He acknowledges the importance of consent and affection in establishing authority. When İdris confronts (S1E20) Salih after learning that he is his son, he patiently criticizes Salih for his violent attempt to conquer Çukur and kill his brother Kahraman:

King huh? I am not the king of Çukur. I don't have a throne. I just have a simple chair in my *kahvehane*. I am the father of Çukur. It is easy to be the king. A despot (*Ali Kıran Baş Kesen*). Everybody is a king, right? The hard thing is to be a father.



Figure 3. İdris hugging Selim.

Emphasizing how consent is key to *Çukur*'s politics, İdris refuses to sit on a throne and rejects the idea of *Çukur* as a kingdom.

To conclude, familialism in *Çukur* resembles that of the AKP. Indeed, one of the most memorable lines from the show is “The family is everything” (*Aile her şeydir*). Yet, there are striking differences from the AKP's familialism. The show displays how the family can be and in fact is a suffocating social space. The family can be and is the evil root of problems. An authoritarian father can and does make one's life unbearable. More than a few abnormalities exist in the Koçovalı family. Brothers kill each other. A son must murder his own father, and then marries a woman involved in that murder. At the end of the show, most of these murderers have dinner together with *Çukur*'s residents in front of İdris's *kavvehane*. This dinner table is organized after many face-offs revealing the flaws of the Koçovalı familialism. Rather than being the “building block of a society” (Öztan 2021, 23), *Çukur*'s familialism is a source of curses but as opposed to cultivating the neoliberal responsibility of the AKP era, the family in *Çukur* can be a space of solidarity. *Çukur*'s familialism does not promote “the desire to construct a state capacity” (*devlet kapasitesi inşa arzusu*) (Öztan 2021) but produces solidarity networks in a neighborhood where state forces cannot enter. *Çukur*'s familialism creates a relatively safe harbor against urban precarity, which comes next.

Protecting the *Çukur* family and the smell of title deeds

In S1E13, it becomes clear how *Çukur* turned out to be a second family to İdris when he negotiates with Vartolu Saadettin to retrieve the title deeds that Vartolu managed to get through some dirty tricks. İdris asks Vartolu's conditions to return the title deeds. Vartolu responds: “My father never told me a fairy tale. Tell me one.” After



Figure 4. Vartolu confronting İdris with the title deeds.

all, Saadettin has partly managed to get his father's recognition by forcing İdris to sit at a negotiation table (Figure 4).

Taken aback, İdris tells his migration story. We learn how he loses his blood family and makes Çukur his new family, one that he protects at all costs. İdris then declares that Vartolu is the first person to get a title deed from him. This reveals the material and symbolic value of a title deed in *Çukur* because losing a title deed signifies a blow to İdris's masculinity and his Çukur family. This is an act of transgression regarding one's honor (*namus*) because, after this meeting, İdris takes the deeds and returns home to talk to Yamaç, who apologizes to his father for letting Vartolu get his hands on the deeds. İdris gives a gendered warning about the relationship between the title deeds and the protection logic:

This (the title deed) is your honor. These are just like your wife's honor. Don't ever use these to achieve anything. You treat them as if they were your eyes. Your eyes are disposable. Çukur is not.

Leading to the loss of virility and *namus*, this is an unthinkable transgressive act for İdris, who compares exchanging land deeds for money to selling one's wife or any other female family member.⁹

Çukur is precious not because of its valuable land but because it has thrived through networks of solidarity that have accrued over the years against enemies and a looming gentrification. Throughout four seasons, a central story in the show is one of a *gecekondu* neighborhood struggling to maintain a community against neoliberal transformation. Except for the Karakuzular, the show constantly introduces

⁹ The concept of *namus* as the safeguarding of virginity and sexual purity of women by male relatives is a widely accepted cultural trope in Turkish screen cultures (Serinkaya 2016). *Çukur* musters the dramatic impact of this moralized, gendered metaphor, evoking the decades long struggle for ownership within the immoral economy of housing.

new villains, who, with their capital acquired from construction, are omnipotent aggressors with strong influence in media and politics. From the big contractor Baykal (*Beyefendi*) in Season 1 to the Erdenet family's men that use their holding companies as a front for drug dealing in Season 3, these men only value infinite urban expansion. When Selim asks Baykal Bey why he is so keen on Çukur in Season 1, he emphasizes how Çukur in its current condition is "wasted potential" with "1.5 billion USD just lying there."

The Koçovalis and Çukur's residents, "İstanbul's thugs" (*İstanbul'un serserileri*) in İdris's words, fight against these well-groomed actors to protect Çukur's title deeds. Then, in addition to their gendered significance, the title deeds signify the "reciprocity principle" (Aymaz 2019) where the Koçovalis and Çukur's residents protect each other. In S4E106, Çağatay Erdenet of the Erdenets captures Selim to threaten him with the title deeds and blackmail him over his sexual orientation.

Çağatay Erdenet: Your brother almost died for these title deeds. A piece of paper. You claim ownership of a place and the state approves. Come on man, die for this?

Selim: That's Haydar Brother's house. Retired hammersmith. His son died in the army. His wife is paralyzed. He takes care of her. Our food bank sends him food every day.

For Çağatay, title deeds may be just meaningless paper pieces, but for Selim, they represent history, solidarity, and belonging. Unable to understand Selim's moral investment in the protection of the title deeds, Çağatay shows another deed. Selim says: "Fatma" or "Fatoş, a b-girl. Her stage name is Dilara. She has a son and a daughter. The son is about to start high school. As she does not pay rent, she is able to take care of her kids." When Çağatay shows other title deeds, Selim says how they represent "life, the life of our family, our people, Çukur." Çağatay gives the deeds back to Selim after stabbing him. Selim returns the deeds to his brothers, asserting his masculinity by sacrificing himself for Çukur's title deeds and choosing "honor" over power. As he dies right in front of the iconic Çukur tattoo painted on a wall across İdris's *kavhehane*, Selim's last words are as follows: "You might leave Çukur, but Çukur won't leave you" (Sen Çukur'dan çıkarsın, Çukur senden çıkmıyor). Before he closes his eyes, he hallucinates about İdris (Figure 5).

Selim has learnt the reciprocity principle beneath the title deeds from his father, as revealed by the sudden flashback to Yamaç when he waits for Selim's dead body in the hospital. In the scene, İdris takes Yamaç and Selim for a walk in the neighborhood, sharing the human stories behind the shanty houses. When Selim interrupts İdris, he gives his son a lecture about the moral system behind Çukur.

İdris: Smell the title deeds. Come on. What's the smell like?

Selim: Well, paper?

İdris: See, you don't get it. Inhale deeply. It's the smell of our people. It's our smell, son. An outsider will grimace [upon smelling it]. But in it, there is [the smell of] roasted onions, coal, cheap detergent, and sweat. That's the real



Figure 5. Selim dies in Yamaç's arms with the title deeds.

smell. . . . You always resisted this, but I never wanted anything else from you: This smell should be here in these streets as long as the Koçovalıs are here. . . . Now, you will visit every single house and see every single room, until their lives, stories, and smell become yours.

The Koçovalıs' *raison d'être* is to defend the neighborhood against those aiming to destroy Çukur's smell, which the Koçovalıs almost lose in the last two seasons. Next, we examine how the Koçovalıs manage to preserve this authentic smell and decide to end the reciprocity principle in Çukur by redistributing the title deeds to its residents.

Resisting “new Çukur” without its tattoo

The Koçovalıs and Çukur's residents defend Çukur against the Erdenets in Season 3. In one epic scene, demolition teams from the municipality come to Çukur to destroy the *gecekondus*. As İdris's sons resist in front of the *kahvehane*, the municipal workers call the police. Yet, Çukur's youth stop them before they can even enter the neighborhood. Before the demolition teams leave Çukur, we see some graffiti stating: “Our house was small. I never had a separate room. So, the *mahalle* is home to me (Figure 6).”

The Koçovalıs' victory against the Erdenets is a precarious one because in Season 4, an internal enemy arises to threaten Çukur. Years after he has left Çukur due to a dispute, İdris's brother Cumali (Amca) returns as a powerful drug dealer. Back when they worked together, İdris considered drugs to be a red line. Cumali was thirsty for more money and power, and İdris forced Cumali to leave Çukur.

Returning for revenge, Cumali controls the neighborhood and assumes leadership. Appearing as a loving uncle, he gains Salih's trust and provides for Çukur's residents. More importantly, his men have taken Yamaç hostage and sent him to Afghanistan,

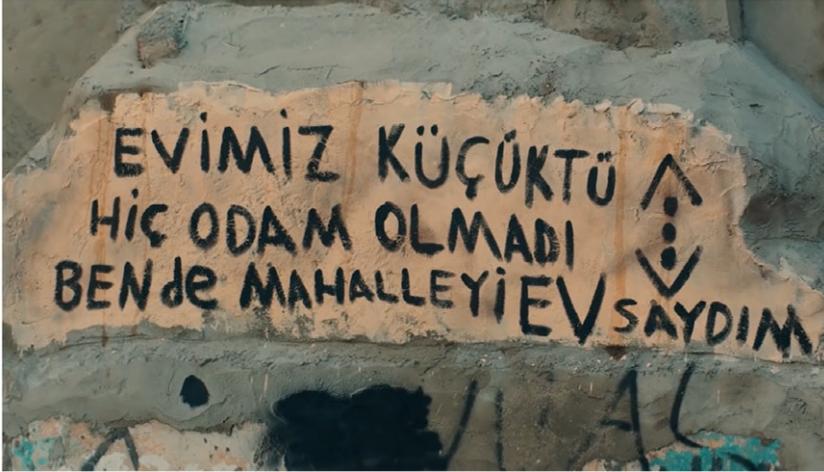


Figure 6. Graffiti.

where he is tortured to the extent that he forgets his own name. Without Yamaç, the Koçovalıs and Çukur lose their direction and dignity. Three years later, Yamaç escapes and returns as a destitute man to see new tattoo shops, scooters, new age coffee shops, and a big banner declaring “Çukur’s face is changing.”¹⁰ The giant tattoo of Çukur in front of which Selim died is almost erased.

The tattoo’s erasure signals the myriad conditions of Uncle Cumali’s new regime. Some, like nephew Cumali, reject his rule and leave the Koçovalı Mansion. When nephew Cumali rejects his uncle’s rules, he and his wife are jailed, because Uncle Cumali informs on them to the police. They are ultimately released thanks to the uncle’s relationship with the police, but they now must live subjugated lives because they have a little daughter. In contrast to nephew Cumali, others in the family and Çukur begrudgingly accept to live under Uncle Cumali’s domination.

Understanding the bottleneck that his brother and other Çukur residents are in, Yamaç keeps investigating what has happened to Çukur. Under the spell of the uncle and happy with how not a single person died under his new regime, his stepbrother Salih tells Yamaç how Çukur has changed over time:

Çukur is now clean. It is peaceful. Çukur is wealthy. More importantly, nobody has died for the last two years. We are the strongest.

The “cleanness” of Çukur has a cost. Old social bonds in Çukur have dissolved. There is what one might call a “new Çukur” now because Yamaç’s uncle has “caused Çukur to rot to the core” (*Çukur’un mayasını bozdu*), as an old-time İdris gunner Metin explains to Yamaç (S4E26). Under the new regime, obedient residents have found

¹⁰ Balat, the main location where *Çukur* is shot, is now a tourist destination for the show’s fans along with an ongoing gentrification. For a discussion of how screen production has transformed İstanbul, see Celik Rappas and Kayhan (2018).

stable employment and bought golden watches and luxurious sports cars whereas the dissidents have become outcasts, destitute and living on unemployment.

Dedicated to reinscribe the tattoo, Yamaç goes to his father's *kavhehane* and talk to his uncle with a set of demands (S4E26). Uncle Cumali accepts all of them, except terminating drug dealing. To convince him, Yamaç peacefully asks him to retire and enjoy life. "Come, join us. Be the half of our father. Do not divide our family, unite it. Let us kiss your hands not out of fear but respect," he says. Uncle asks whether he's finished. Yamaç says: "No, I'm not. Our father entrusted Çukur in us (*emanet*). It is not valuable because of its land (*taşı toprağı*). It's valuable because of its people. You have caused Çukur to rot to its core. This place does not smell like Çukur."

To reinscribe Çukur's tattoo and retrieve its smell, Yamaç needs Salih's support. Salih is not happy with drug dealing but he is glad that nobody has died in the last few years. In S4E26, the dissidents of the "new Çukur" blame Salih for his compliance with the new regime. Salih reminds Yamaç and others how their "old Çukur" was not "as pure as the driven snow" (*sütten çıkma ak kaşık*). Salih yells at Yamaç to question the former masculinist protection regime: "Old Çukur . . . where is my father? Where is Selim? Half of our family is in the cemetery." Salih takes Yamaç for a tour. The gunners are no longer on the roofs because "there is nothing to fear anymore," he says in contesting the masculinist protection's violent dimensions.

Yamaç is convinced about the peaceful environment but still declares war on his uncle. After various battles, he wins the war and unites the Koçovalıs and Çukur as one big family. Redistributing the title deeds to Çukur's residents, he declares the end of the masculinist protection regime in the neighborhood:

You had a lot of losses. I am aware. I would like to say it's over but then, I cannot know what tomorrow will bring. Yet, if this system goes on like this, there will be many who want to take our Çukur from us. We made a decision. These (title deeds) are yours. They always were yours but Çukur is now only yours. We are with you whenever you need. So, the Koçovalıs will keep protecting Çukur. But Çukur no longer needs to protect the Koçovalıs. Nobody will be hurt to protect the owners of Çukur. By the way, we never owned Çukur. You truly know that. Still, as long as we had these (the title deeds), there were many who assumed that we were the kings of the *mahalle*. Yet, Çukur does not have a king. Never. Maybe, it has a father. And that is İdris Koçovalı.

Yamaç and his brothers take a step to end the relationship of indebtedness and the logic of masculinist protection in the *mahalle* for which many have been sacrificed. Whether they can be successful is contested because as Yamaç returns home, three young men are still waiting in front of the Koçovalı Mansion as guards. That is, even if Yamaç does not ask for protection from the *mahalle*, Çukur's residents still want to continue their bonds with the Koçovalıs.

Ultimately, as in the case of the AKP's neighborhoods, masculinity does shape Çukur, but in a radically different way because Çukur rejects state surveillance. It refuses to invest in what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls "the promise of happiness" and the "political economy of the good life" brought by orderly neighborhoods. Rejecting the dominant codes of "the good life" such as entrepreneurialism, conspicuous consumption, and individualism along with the housing projects that produce

debt for its old residents, *Çukur* instead foregrounds solidarity. Representing what Chad Shomura (2016) calls “the bad good life,” the neighborhood both endorses and still tries to overcome the impasse into which it is born. While trying to overcome the impasse, it does not invest in the fantasies of a good life defined by a strong state that monitors the citizens. Somewhat operating as part of what Moten and Harney (2013) calls “the undercommons,” *Çukur* refuses the state’s recognition, endorsing spaces of flight and fugitivity in the neighborhood. Aesthetically rejecting the labeling of such neighborhoods as unproductive, the show thus recuperates the moral and creative value of attachment to spaces that may not necessarily be linked with a neighborhood worth living, and foregrounds urban justice as an ideal to hold onto.¹¹

Conclusion

Opening Iris Marion Young’s “logic of masculinist protection” to debate, *Çukur* suggests that there could in fact be *multiple logics* to masculinist protection where mutual loyalty and reciprocity trump absolute obedience, private ownership, and economic interests. In that regard, *Çukur* reveals how the seemingly hegemonic masculinity behind its authoritarian cultural universe can in fact remain politically precarious in a neoliberal authoritarian context precisely because it endorses fugitive political imaginations outside state capture, state-sanctified forms of family, and commodified urban life. Specifically, family in *Çukur* is not a sacred space but an ambivalent domain of flaws, curses, and solidarity. Masculinity is not absolute but contested in the family, requiring consent for ruling. Similarly, the *mahalle* is a protected haven from urban precarities and state surveillance. No matter how hierarchical they are, *Çukur*’s men reject unquestioned political loyalty, conspicuous consumption, and entrepreneurship while endorsing the various impasses in family and urban life. Terminating its own logic of protection in the end, *Çukur*, one could argue, even recuperates new possibilities of belonging and coexistence where one could have multiple families not restricted to the physical space of a house. Showing that absolute political obedience and dependence is not the only way out of neoliberal precarity and authoritarianism, *Çukur* once again confirms the power of popular culture and cultural production in representing liminal spaces that can exist outside the oppressive power of the state and the commodifying logics of the markets.

Acknowledgments. The authors would like to thank Yamaç Okur for allowing us to use the high resolution images.

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¹¹ These may explain why the show became successful in a country hit by an economic crisis and political injustices.

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