

# Book Review

Fatih Ermiş, *A History of Ottoman Economic Thought: Developments before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Routledge, 2014. 212 pp.

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In this impressively extensive analysis of a variety of Ottoman narratives from the 16th through the 18th centuries, Fatih Ermiş has done a great service to the study of early modern Ottoman thought. Although the book is titled “Ottoman Economic Thought,” it would not be wrong to see this study more comprehensively as an historical analysis. To quote, the basis of the book is, “an understanding of Ottoman mentality of economic issues [that] presupposes an understanding of the total social view of the Ottomans” (p. 32). In setting the framework as such, Ermiş is indeed positioning his work with respect to several traditions of Ottoman history and historiography at once. Such a variety of traditions, stretching from the impact of Polanyi more generally to the overwhelming heritage of the concept of the ‘circle of justice’ in the study of early modern Ottomans more particularly, enables the author to not disassociate economic thought from the society at hand. “[S]ince economics was not a separate sphere in the Ottoman empire, ideas about economic matters should be searched for in its political, social and religious writings” (p. 2). As such, both his work and the subject of his work, i.e., early modern Ottomans, represent a very Polanyi-esque approach: the economic as embedded in the social (Polanyi, 1944). Indeed, Polanyi’s distinction between formal and substantive economics is useful to Ermiş as an “instrument for understanding how people interpreted economic events in non-capitalistic societies” (p. 2). Moreover, Polanyi’s “emphasis on the instituted character of economics” helps explain the uniqueness of the Ottomans as “each society has its own institutions and these are not identical to those in any other society” (p. 3).

Thus we find ourselves in the so-called classical period of Ottoman history as the only possible framework and era in which to study economic thought as an inextricable part of the greater non-capitalistic whole that also encompassed the political and the military aspects. Although now somewhat abandoned in the scholarship, the very periodization of the empire through the classical and the modern obscures the transformative processes at work throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Admittedly the author seeks to study Ottoman economic thought before the modernization era, and hence he covers the centuries before the 19<sup>th</sup>, still the era in-and-of-itself is almost a necessity for him because it is the absence of capitalism that Ermiş finds in this era that

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allows for the Polanyi-esque framework. This absence remains the same even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when there were major economic transformations – a point on which there is now a consensus among scholars of political economy.<sup>[1]</sup> For Ermiş, “the classical theoretical framework was valid at least until the end of the eighteenth century” (p. 196). Only in this non-capitalistic environment, Ermiş claims, can one point to an understanding of economic life centered on the Ottoman political concept of the ‘circle of justice’ that linked producers, middlemen and soldiers (p. 10).

In spite of the issue of whether early modern Ottoman economy was capitalistic or not, the use of formulating the ‘circle of justice’ as a frozen concept that guided the empire and its intellectual production in this era in studying its uniqueness is far from clear. In other words, referring to Polanyi does not hide how Ermiş sets the Ottoman framework in a *sui generis* understanding of a classical system that has been revised considerably in the past two decades. Beginning with the work of Daniel Goffman (2002), many an Ottomanist has re-oriented the “classical age” to the early modern, situating the empire in world history and the transition to the modern state. Indeed, the eminent Ottoman historian Halil İnalcık (1993) who coined the era as the classical age, noted as much: the concept itself was only another example of various state traditions that could be found in many different places of the world.\* The premise for many imperial state traditions was that an active military class would both conquer land and raise revenue under the authority of the ruler, which no doubt comes with an assumption of expansion. When expansion lost effectiveness, the logic and hence the concept no longer held. It is a well-known fact that many Ottoman intellectuals of the day, beginning with Naima in the wake of the unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1683, but also Tursun Bey, Koçi Bey and Kınalızade Ali Efendi rekindled the idea of an assumed traditional equilibrium belonging to a “golden era” in a literature that revolved around the decline paradigm (Howard, 1966: 52-77).

It is this Ottoman historical and historiographical background upon which Ermiş also employs the now much discussed concept of the circle of justice together with the concept of Humourism, i.e., the four tiered division of the body as a social classification system. Humourism here is just another categorization that explains the links between soldiers, middlemen and producers to just political rule that is arguably more of a formula as identified by others.\* For Ermiş, the political formula as explained by contemporary

Ottoman literature that I mentioned above also serves in viewing Ottoman economic ideas of the age. Although both concepts support the conventional view of the golden age and then the decline of the Ottoman Empire, Ermiş is to be credited for employing them in a new way, as the two categories bring us to the concept of society. The point again is a Polanyi-esque framework that analyzes how Ottoman thought intertwined the social, the political and the economic aspects like the blood, bile and phlegm together sustained the human body. A scheme in which the Sultan acted like a physician endowed with the responsibility of diagnosis and remedy found that, “If this

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[1] Following upon Ariel Salzman. (1993: 393-423)

was not accomplished, the imbalance increased, as did injustice in the country” (p. 11). Therefore, justice was at once the guiding principle of governance and “the very base of the social structure” (p. 11). That is, the concept of the circle of justice was based on justice just as in Ermiş the idea of balance was based on humourism.

These formulations come to life, and do so in contrast to the set framework of analysis that locks different thinkers to the empire of a unique unchanging status. Chapter 4 tackles a specifically economic literature of household economy, the household here being the common unit of social life. Starting with Kinalızade’s usage, we learn that household economy was based on certain ethics that were scientifically laid out in order to achieve justice: “[H]ousehold economy is a discipline that is used to maintain (the) order between (the) members of a household and to maintain its sustenance in a proper way” (p.81). This proper way resulted from a variety of household activities including spending and saving money, disciplining children, managing slaves, familial respect and social behavior. Ermiş studies Kinalızade’s work through all of these activities and shows how they may be sustained ethically to arrive at justice. Ermiş also gives us a thorough discussion of the epistemology of the term for money used by Kinalızade who is most clear about its significance. Money, for example, or rather the exchange value of metals, is necessary to not only determine commodity value but also to protect justice (p. 89). He points out that Ibn Khaldun and Maqrizi (a Mamluk historian) support this very worldly definition and function of money.<sup>[2]</sup>

Although a clear-cut argument is not forthcoming, one gathers that Kinalızade and others also wrote on economic activities from crafts to trade in this practical manner, endowing them with ethics, which Ermiş names practical philosophy. With roots in Aristotle, this widely employed conceptualization of moral household management as described by Kinalızade but also by Al-Gazali (p. 86) also applies to the entire country. In this work, not only the ideas of Polanyi but also of Nizam al-Mulk help identify the household of the sultan as the largest unit, that is, the country. The entire discussion of household economy described through this variety of thinkers does not however end with a strong conclusion on how and in what ways Kinalızade helps us construct Ottoman economic thought.

One hopes to move along the body of the book where the Polanyi-esque framework can actually take us through Ottoman economic thinking reflecting a transformation, rather than repeating the already extant literature on how contemporary Ottoman manuscripts demonstrated a crisis that stemmed from the dissolution of the golden classical system. But chapters 2 on terminological analysis, 5 on some Ottoman regulations with regard to price and market control and 7 on what the author calls “real economic application” (pp. 163-191) are somewhat disparate. Instead in Chapter 6, as in the chapter on household economy, we find the opportunity to consider more economic thinking at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly that of a minor bureaucrat

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<sup>[2]</sup> “On the ruler’s justice and good administration depended the peasants’ and merchants’ ability to generate prosperity; from this wealth taxes flowed to pay the military, which supported the king and protected the realm.” Darling, L.T. (2008: 11).

and of an ambassador, respectively Süleyman Penah who wrote a report, and Ebubekir Ratıb who wrote a book. Ermiş selects these two figures' works to "show the continuity of the classical Ottoman ideas" through his concept of humourism (p. 122 and 129). Again many others, such as Enveri Efendi and Sadrazam Koca Yusuf Paşa (pp. 135-137) come to the aid of Ermiş to elaborate what he meant by concepts like humourism. A strong conclusion, blurred by another discussion of the rule of the state, on how and in what ways Ottoman examples of humorism help form economic thinking, is not forthcoming. In addition, before the discussion of trade and monetary policy as depicted by these statesmen, what we are presented is an outline of their analysis of political rule and its components from the sultan to the *reaya* (subjects). Here too, the regulatory function of the state is based on the concept of justice. In a Polanyi-esque framework there is nothing wrong in combining political issues such as welfare with economic thinking. Yet one finds a confusion of genres between the different literature used in the two most relevant chapters from Kınalızade to Ebubekir Ratıb to Ahmed Resmi Efendi. Are we to see all Ottoman writing in the service of the state? Are the state and the economy one and the same thing that did not change? Ermiş appears to be suggesting just that indeed:

"..I claim that there was a settled tradition and status quo, and radical change and reform, such as would be necessary to rapidly industrialize, was not suitable to this atmosphere of contentedness. There were elements of the Ottoman elite which wanted to make changes to the social organization of the empire, yet these elements were not predominant in the Ottoman political class. Even this element did not envisage an advent of capitalism, with all of its social, political and economic implications. One may observe that for such reform minded bureaucrats, the main parameters of the Ottoman classical system also remained central pillars of their framework of thought. Therefore, the challenge for such bureaucrats was twofold: on one hand they tried to produce an answer to the challenge of capitalism without introducing it into the empire; on the other hand, they had to struggle against those who were categorically opposed to radical changes in the system from which they profited so greatly. This process separated the Ottoman Empire from the *Zeitgeist*." (p.194)

It would be very helpful in this reprint of Ermiş's dissertation to include a discussion on the usage of the writings and their authors as part of a discussion of Ottoman historiography. For indeed, what Ermiş does amounts to intellectual history which could very well be envisaged with the political, economic and social aspects, drawing on Polanyi; thus it would benefit the discussion on the bureaucrat/intellectual tradition of Ottoman history writing. As stated very clearly in the introduction, the author set out to distance himself from a Weberian analysis à la Sabri Ülgener and Ahmet Güneri Sayar in the quest of analyzing the 'nature' of economic thinking in conventional Turkish historiography. Admittedly Ermiş painstakingly stays away from any Islamicist essentialization of Ottoman economic thought and instead strives to present us with an Ottoman worldview. But after we read about so many different

thinkers, set in an already debated conventional framework albeit analyzed through a seemingly new approach based on Polanyi, and employing known concepts anew, one still wonders if a singular Ottoman worldview really existed. Even if it did, was this so unique?

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