

with different motivations and circumstances. This book will be of great interest to scholars and students of citizenship, migration, transnationalism, Turkey, and the United States.

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Erdem Yörük, *The Politics of the Welfare State in Turkey: How Social Movements and Elite Competition Created a Welfare State*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2022. xvi + 221 pages.

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Research on welfare politics is still highly skewed towards countries in Western Europe, North America, and Australasia. In the 1990s and 2000s, one exception to this was the once-burgeoning literature on the relationship between developing countries – mostly in Africa and Latin America – and international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Although this literature has advanced our understanding of the internationally imposed limitations on the fiscal sovereignty of developing countries, it has not provided us with a sufficient grasp of the influence of domestic politics on social policy change in these countries. Overall, the domestic politics of welfare in developing countries has long been a “black box.” In the 2010s, however, researchers began paying attention to the politics of social policy in previously understudied countries, including India, Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Erdem Yörük’s *The Politics of the Welfare State in Turkey* is highly relevant in this context. It is also a welcome addition to the growing literature on Turkish welfare politics.

Yörük uses the theory presented by Piven and Cloward in their 1971 book entitled *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, which offers an explanation for the emergence and changing scope of poor relief in the United States. The Piven–Cloward thesis characterizes welfare provision as a government response to civil disorder and contends that welfare programs, along with their expansion and contraction, serve broader political and economic goals that are unrelated to welfare. Yörük bases his main hypothesis on Piven and Cloward’s theory and uses the republican history of Turkey – the post-1980s history of the Kurdish question in particular – as a testing ground.

Yörük’s book makes an important empirical contribution. It is based on an original dataset of organized public protests that were chronicled in the Turkish daily newspaper, *Cumhuriyet*. The dataset affords Yörük a rare opportunity to illustrate changes in organized public protests over time; it also allows him to go beyond the often sketchy official statistics on strike activities and bring clarity to anecdote-based accounts of contentious periods in the republican history. Yörük’s conclusion will surprise many scholars of republican history: “The level of grassroots political activism in the neoliberal era has been comparable to the 1970s, the heyday of grassroots

political activism in Turkey” (p. 185). This and similar empirical findings illustrated in the book will benefit social movements and Turkish studies scholars.

The book’s other laudable contribution is that, by situating welfare politics in the context of the politics of the Kurdish question, it expands the horizons for future researchers of welfare politics in Turkey. In shedding light on the interactions between the politics of social policy and the politics of the Kurdish question, for instance, Yörük cites instances of ethnic targeting in social assistance programs and the granting of free access to health care (“Poor Kurds are more likely to hold a Green Card than poor non-Kurds”) (p. 165). He maintains that these function as political tools for curbing the Kurdish nationalist movement. Given the book’s wealth of empirical evidence, the analysis would have strengthened the argument if it had gone beyond this statistical observation and unpacked the concrete mechanisms through which ethnic targeting is implemented. Future research can explore how ethnic targeting in social assistance was put into practice and determine whether there were other factors that might have led to a conclusion that ethnic targeting was indeed at play.

Yörük presents a case study that will be useful to an international audience desiring to understand the dynamics of social policy change in Turkey from a broad international perspective. Yörük situates Turkey in the Global South, with the emerging market economies of Brazil, China, India, and South Africa). The book argues that the increasing political significance of the informally employed and the poor in post-1980s emerging market economies is a key trend that defines the political context for social policy change. Yörük argues that this has happened in two ways. First, in electoral democracies such as Brazil and India, the informally employed and the poor have become the largest constituency that political competitors need to take seriously. Second, these groups also get organized, and their political organizations have taken the form of identity politics (p. 35). Responding to the growing threat that these political developments pose to the neoliberal order, the governments instituted welfare programs, many of which offered cash transfers. The expansion of cash transfers (and, by extension, social expenditures) in emerging market economies in the post-1980s period is therefore a political strategy designed to prevent social unrest, garner support (political mobilization), and silence civil unrest if it has already emerged (political containment). In his concluding chapter, Yörük reiterates the similarities between the Turkish case and those in Brazil, China, India, and South Africa, but he fails to elaborate. What is more striking, the conclusion makes no mention of Turkey’s de-democratization process, which has brought the country to the brink of a dictatorship especially in the wake of the 2017 constitutional referendum on the transition to an authoritarian presidential system. He would have done well to address a number of questions: What role did welfare politics play in Turkey’s exit from democracy? Does a change in political regime make any difference in the targeting of social assistance programs? How does regime change affect welfare politics in Turkey? How does welfare politics in Turkey compare to that of other countries? He therefore leaves these issues for future research.


Yörük positions his book as a response to “the dominant scholarship,” which explains social policy development and change in Turkey as an automatic response to structural social and economic dynamics such as demographic and sectoral transitions (p. 7). Arguing that “these explanations have essentially disregarded political

factors,” he presents his book as one that “brings political factors to the fore” (p. 7), but because it lacks any reference to this literature, this claim is a straw man. The argument that “Turkish governments have been acting primarily on political concerns in their welfare-policy making” (p. 185) is not surprising. This does not, however, detract from the book’s originality: its focus on the political use of social policy programs as a tool for ethnic conflict management. Still, Yörük’s contribution to the literature on the politics of social policies in Turkey could have been better explained if he had engaged more deeply and directly with earlier works on welfare politics in Turkey that cover a range of welfare sectors (e.g. pensions and social care) and diverse aspects of politics (e.g. electoral politics and business politics). The question of whether the economic crisis of the past five years has made any difference in the function of social assistance programs merits further attention in the future.

One blind spot in the analysis in *The Politics of the Welfare State in Turkey* is the assumption that welfare politics is always politically less salient than ethnic identity politics and that the two can be easily separated. This questionable premise is rooted in the theoretical underpinnings of the book. We can see this assumption at play when Yörük writes, “In the neoliberal system, the informal proletariat mostly does not struggle for social assistance, but rather for other economic, ethnic, or religious demands. Most importantly, the Kurds demand cultural rights, but they are provided with free health care. In other words, Kurds are provided with social assistance while they are struggling for something else” (p. 189). True, the political demands of the masses rarely take the form of asking for concrete social policy programs. The actual demands of the supporters of a mass movement, let alone an ethnic group, would generally be broader, more complex, and often nebulous. They often include both cultural and socioeconomic demands. Can we be so sure that ordinary people disentangle these complex demands and see a trade-off between cultural and socioeconomic rights? Political leadership often does that for them, presenting the relationship between cultural and socioeconomic rights as either antithetical or complementary. What is more, not all social policy programs are inherently compatible with a rights-based approach or have empowering effects. After all, social policy is not a singular entity that can be understood from one ideological perspective. Social policy programs are instruments for pursuing political goals. They differ considerably in terms of their design and their social impact. They can also regulate power relations between beneficiaries and powerholders in different ways. It is partly the variety of political options within social policy that makes welfare politics an exciting field of study. Instead of subjugating welfare politics to cultural politics, treating both as equally important domains of political activity would pave the way to a more nuanced approach to politics.

The Politics of the Welfare State in Turkey offers a refreshingly new perspective on the domestic political underpinnings of social policy change. It takes a special place in the first wave of empirical studies of welfare politics in Turkey. Questioning the assumed benevolence and apolitical understanding of social policy, Yörük issues a clear warning: The political functions of social policy programs can and often do go beyond the welfare of their beneficiaries. The political analysis of social policy programs must

therefore take into account their multiple purposes. Yörük's work offers significant takeaways for those interested in opening up the black box of domestic politics of welfare in the Global South. It also provides a sound basis for future studies at the nexus of contentious politics and social policy change in Turkey and beyond.

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