

BOOK REVIEW

Veli Yadırgı, *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 316 pages.
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Until the 2000s, the number of academic books and articles written on the Kurdish issue in Turkey was limited. Apart from the few studies conducted by notable scholars such as Martin van Bruinessen, and the significant work by İsmail Beşikçi, there was little noteworthy academic research on the Kurdish issue in Turkey. However, since the 2000s, there has been a significant increase in publications on the subject, with a rich body of work published by reputable publishing houses. This is mostly due to the rise in the number of Kurdish scholars who have completed their academic training in Europe and the United States. It is essential to read the work of Veli Yadırgı, who built his academic career in the United Kingdom (UK), in this context.

A second point worth emphasizing is that research examining the link between the economy and politics has been relatively scarce. This is partly because the Kurdish issue has been overly politicized, and, on the other hand, it has often been reduced to a cultural identity matter. Veli Yadırgı's book shifts attention back to economic inequalities and underdevelopment, focusing on the correspondence between the deepening economic underdevelopment and the loss of administrative autonomy of Kurds. What distinguishes Yadırgı's perspective is the link he draws between the loss of autonomy and economic underdevelopment. Administrative centralization and modernization in the region led to economic decline, a theme that is elaborated in more detail in the second and third chapters. The critical review of the literature presented in the first chapter will be further expanded upon in the following sections to better illustrate the book's contribution to existing scholarship.

The second chapter focuses on the period from the sixteenth century, when the Kurdish *beys* (lords) were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, up until the nineteenth century. During this time, there were semi-autonomous Kurdish administrative structures, which persisted on the periphery of the Empire's central administration until the 1800s. From 1847 onwards, with the onset of Ottoman modernization and centralization, these autonomous structures were dismantled. The economy of Kurdish cities that was notably vibrant until the nineteenth century, with Diyarbakır and Erzurum being key cities that exported various products to surrounding regions, began to decline in the aftermath of such dismantling.

The third chapter focuses on the political economy of Ottoman Kurdistan from 1800 to 1914. This was a period marked by the centralization of administration, the elimination of autonomous structures, and the emergence of the first Kurdish uprisings. At the same time, the Empire became integrated into the world capitalist system, which required both administrative centralization and legal rationalization. This period provides a clear example of Max Weber's concept of bureaucratic

rationalization. The establishment of new central institutions led to the reorganization of the state, with a deepening division of labor in administration. Paradoxically, the underdevelopment of Kurdish regions compared to other parts of the Empire was a direct result of this centralization. According to Yadırgı, there is a direct relationship between the abolition of autonomous structures and the economic collapse of the region. With the elimination of Kurdish *beyliks*, tribal structures filled the void, leading to a chaotic environment and a significant decline in agricultural production.

The fourth chapter addresses the transformation of the Kurdish issue during the collapse of the Empire and the nation-building process during the Turkish Republic. This period marks the peak of the social-demographic engineering of the new Republic. The Kurdish region experienced significant economic de-development and social deformation during the founding years of the Republic. The national economic policies introduced by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) led to disasters for the Kurds and other minorities. Economic destruction was reflected in the 50 percent drop in production in Kurdish regions compared to western Anatolia, leading to a 50 percent loss in income in the Kurdish regions.

One of the most distinctive features of the book is the author's year-long archival research at the UK Foreign Office archives in London, which forms the backbone of the study. The data collected from these British archives is central to the book's analysis, particularly the reports prepared by British consuls between 1850 and 1945 regarding the region's economy. These reports offer a macro-level view of the region's structural transformations, especially in the absence of systematic archival data on Kurdish areas and with the weak state of Ottoman archival resources. While the research involves an archival study of economic activities from the period, it is complemented by fieldwork conducted through around fifteen interviews with local experts in Diyarbakır, Mardin, Urfa, and Gaziantep.

Comparing his findings to notable Ottoman historians such as Sureyya Faroughi or Şevket Pamuk, Yadırgı argues that there is a significant lack of reliable, systematic data on the economic activities of Kurdish principalities under Ottoman rule. This absence, he contends, is not limited to the Republican period but traces its roots back to the nineteenth-century Ottoman historiography, which overlooked the changing economic and social dynamics in the Kurdish regions.

Another strength of the book is related to the continuities between the Empire and the Republic. İsmail Beşikçi identifies the link between the Forced Settlement Law and assimilation policies on the economic backwardness of the region but fails to recognize the historical continuity of these policies from the Ottoman to the Republican period. Yadırgı's work, in contrast, delves into a broader historical context, covering a much longer time frame, from 1514 to the present, and traces the incorporation of Kurdish principalities into the Empire. This long-term perspective allows for a broader understanding of the historical processes, although it also introduces certain limitations in terms of the depth of analysis. If the temporal scope had been narrower, a more detailed historical-sociological analysis might have been possible. I should also point out that the contribution of interviews with experts in such a comprehensive study, as well as in a multi-method approach, has been overlooked.

Yadırgı's work provides an important contribution by critiquing the historical narratives surrounding the economic backwardness of the Kurdish region. Yadırgı positions himself against the dominant narrative and social scientists who argue that

capitalism was unable to take root in the region due to the dominance of feudal structures, claiming that these traditional cultural codes hindered entrepreneurship and capital accumulation. To refute this widespread (particularly Weberian) argument, he takes a step back to examine the period from the sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. During this period, although feudal structures and traditional social arrangements were dominant, the region's economy, compared to other regions, did not lag behind.

This data suggests that the backwardness of the region cannot solely be attributed to feudalism and traditional structures. From the 1830s onwards, the dissolution of Kurdish beyliks and the confiscation of their lands led to two primary consequences. First, agricultural productivity decreased. Second, small peasants, who had limited capacity to produce and did not receive the necessary state support, saw a significant decline in agricultural output. This process led to a dramatic increase in poverty. Another key finding is that, although there was significant regional inequality between Ottoman Balkan cities and Anatolian cities, there was no considerable difference between Kurdish cities and those in Anatolia. If backwardness only emerged in the nineteenth century, the key question becomes: what factors caused this regression?

Yadırgı argues that the primary cause of the region's backwardness lies not in culture but in the transformation of administrative reasoning. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Kurdish principalities were dissolved and replaced by centralized state administration. The loss of the region's autonomy led to its economic stagnation. Thus, it is not the feudal traditions but rather the Ottoman bureaucratic centralization, or modernity itself, that caused the Kurdish regions to fall behind. This interpretation also questions popular narratives, which continue to present traditional social structures as the key impediment to the region's development, both during the Ottoman period and after the foundation of the Republic.

Yadırgı's work also critically engages with Marxist theories, which argue that the backwardness of the Kurdish region is a result of the region's inability to integrate with the world market economy and lack of infrastructure (railroads), preventing the region from connecting with the global capitalist market, and its feudal structures as the true causes of its economic stagnation. In this model, the Kurdish region is seen as a "periphery," where it exports agricultural products and energy to the West while receiving industrial goods in return, which leads to its economic stagnation. Yadırgı critiques the center-periphery analysis, calling for a deeper examination of the long-term impacts of state centralization and capitalist development in the region. He suggests that rather than merely focusing on the direct causes of backwardness, a comprehensive analysis should be conducted that examines the role of state centralization and the loss of Kurdish autonomy in a broader historical context. By focusing on these long-term, multifaceted power dynamics, Yadırgı aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the processes that led to the region's economic stagnation while also acknowledging the agency of the Kurdish people in these processes.

In conclusion, Yadırgı's book provides a critical reassessment of the common explanations for the economic backwardness of the Kurdish region, which have often been attributed to feudalism and traditional social structures. Yadırgı argues that the dissolution of Kurdish autonomy and the imposition of a centralized state were

the primary causes of economic decline in the Kurdish region. His approach challenges the traditional academic and popular narratives that focus on feudalism and traditionalism as the main obstacles to development. By critiquing Marxist, modernization, and colonial frameworks, Yadırgı calls for a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the region's historical trajectory, one that includes the transformation of state structures, social relations, and the agency of Kurdish people in the face of these shifts. From a meta-theoretical perspective, this historical analysis suggests a reciprocal relationship between self-governance and economic (under-) development. This insight elevates the work beyond a mere descriptive historical analysis and provides a theoretical contribution to the literature. Yadırgı's empirical findings, when combined with historical data, significantly enrich the academic discourse on the subject, and this contribution is worthy of further exploration.

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