



Capitalism Debates in Türkiye in the Context of the Transformation of Socio-economic Structure from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic

Osmanlıdan Cumhuriyet'e Sosyo-ekonomik Yapının Dönüşümü Bağlamında Türkiye'de Kapitalizm Tartışmaları

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Abstract

Within the organization of human and social life, the institution of the economy emerges as a social structure identified with the struggle against material nature. Shaped within the well-known complexity of individual behavior, the economic institution appears as a reality that guides, constrains, and surrounds individual experience. Socioeconomic structures, which vary according to the conditions of the capitalist world and differ from country to country, are also shaped by historical processes. In this sense, historical, contemporary, and future-oriented debates on socioeconomic formations draw from these structures as sources of contention. While the dramatic trajectory of Western Europe throughout the Middle Ages culminated in the triumph of modernity, in regions such as the Ottoman Empire—where strong centralized states prevailed—the relative stability of the traditional period gave way to an anxious drive for reform during modernity. The study used a historical comparative method with an interpretive approach. This study evaluates the development of the capitalist socioeconomic order—now the prevailing reality of the modern age—by comparing Western Europe and the Ottoman experience. In particular, it seeks to answer why the social structure transmitted from the Ottoman Empire to Republican Türkiye failed to undergo a complete capitalist transformation. This inquiry also aims to discuss perspectives on how the phenomenon of not having become capitalist should be interpreted. As a result of the study, it has been concluded that the Ottoman Empire, rather than failing to become capitalist, deliberately chose not to pursue capitalist development based on original principles that shaped its economic mentality. Moreover, despite this distinctive socio-economic and historical process, emphasis has been placed on the value of the great efforts made during the founding period of the Republic of Turkey to implement a rational development policy under challenging global conditions.

Keywords: Socioeconomic Structure, Capitalism, Western Europe, Ottoman Empire, Türkiye.

Öz

İnsan ve toplum yaşamının örgütlenmesi içinde, maddi doğaya karşı verilen mücadele ile özdeşleşen toplumsal kurum ekonomidir. Birey davranışının bilinen karmaşası içinde şekillenen ekonomi kurumu, bireyin davranışlarını yönlendiren, sınırlandıran, bireyin yaşantısını çevreleyen bir realite olarak görünür. Bireyde yaşanan kapitalist dünya koşullarına göre değişen ve ülkelere göre de farklılaşan sosyoekonomik yapılar, aynı zamanda tarihsel bir sürecin ürünü olarak da şekillenmektedir. Bu anlamda sosyoekonomik yapılara ilişkin tarih, bugün ve gelecek düzleminde ortaya çıkan hararetlî tartışmalara kaynaklık etmektedir. Batı Avrupa'nın orta çağ boyunca şekillenen dramatik hikâyesinin modernliğin zaferiyle sonuçlanmasına karşın, Osmanlı ve benzer güçlü merkezi devlet egemenliğindeki coğrafyalarda geleneksel dönem boyunca süren nispi düzenin modern dönemde bir yenileşme hummasına dönüşmüş olması sözü edilen tartışmaların bir örneğidir. Çalışma, yorumlayıcı yaklaşım temelinde tarihsel karşılaştırmalı yöntem ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışmada, modern çağın gerçekliği olarak beliren kapitalist sosyoekonomik yapının gelişim süreci Batı Avrupa ve Osmanlıtecrübelerinin mukayesesine dayanarak değerlendirilmeye ve özellikle Osmanlıdan Cumhuriyet Türkiye'sine dönüşerek aktarılan toplumsal yapının niçin yeterince kapitalistleşemediği sorusuna cevap aranmaya çalışılmıştır. Bu arayış, kapitalistleşememiş olma olgusunun nasıl okunması gerektiğine dair bir perspektif tartışmasını da amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma sonucunda, Osmanlı Devleti'nin iktisadi zihniyeti belirleyen özgün prensipler temelinde kapitalistleşememektен ziyade bilinçli olarak kapitalistleşmemeyi tercih ettiği anlaşılmıştır. Ayrıca bu özgün sosyoekonomik tarihsel süreçte rağmen zorlu dünya koşullarında Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin kuruluş döneminde rasyonel bir kalkınma politikasını hayata geçirmek için büyük bir çaba harcamasının kıymetine vurgu yapılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyoekonomik Yapı, Kapitalizm, Batı Avrupa, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Türkiye.

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Introduction

In the face of the various existential challenges documented by the discipline of history and the sciences concerned with prehistoric eras, humanity has sought to confront these difficulties through social organization, striving not only to sustain life but also to improve it. The human effort to realize a desirable form of life by purging their surroundings (village, city, country, world) of obstructive hardships and rendering them orderly has become synonymous with the set of behaviors and phenomena known as the economy—and ultimately with the social institution it constitutes. Etymologically derived from the Greek root *oikos* + *nomos* (*oĩkos* = house, *νόμος* = order), the term signified initially "household management" or "order of the home."¹ As expected, humanity throughout history has been subjected to a wide range of adversities, and in response has made the act of generating solutions a defining aspect of its existence. So much so that, apart from a few primitive tribes—whose lifestyles have remained essentially unchanged for thousands of years and thus serve as subjects for anthropological field studies—most of humanity has undergone profound transformations throughout history. These transformations have at times manifested as ascents and at other times as collapses. Such cycles of rise and fall have not occurred in a universally consistent pattern; instead, they have unfolded as shifts driven by cultural fault lines at the level of peoples, nations, and continents

In the course of this transformative process, the economic characteristics exhibited by both individual societies and humanity at large have, unsurprisingly, also undergone significant changes. It is well known that sociology and economic theory offer differing perspectives on the social and economic stages through which humanity has passed. A central debate within the social sciences revolves around whether these stages indicate a universal transformation or rather a change constrained by time, space, culture, or national context. Nonetheless, the historical trajectory of humanity—progressing along various paths—has arrived at what is now widely recognized, both in its emergence and impact, as the era of the modern capitalist world economy. It is, of course, evident that not all countries occupy the same position or fulfill the same role within this capitalist world economy. While a small number of developed nations—often called global actors—possess dominant economic power, the rest of the world, largely excluded from such power and from structured social organization, is categorized as underdeveloped or developing nations. According to some, this global configuration resembles a calculable equation; in reality, however, it points to a profound inequality and a set of deeply rooted issues. In this context, the question of whether a more equitable world order is possible—and, if so, how it might be achieved—has become a matter of grave concern and debate among social scientists.

When examined from Türkiye's perspective, the significance of the historical process that spans the Ottoman Empire, the founding of the Republic of Türkiye, and the

¹ "Economy" EYun oĩkosoĩkos ev + EYun nomós Last Update: 22 December 2024, <https://www.etimolojiturkce.com/kelime/ekonomi>

present becomes particularly evident. It is well established that the stages of development of the capitalist economy manifested themselves in forms within Turkish social and economic structures that differed substantially from those observed in Western Europe. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, the unique configuration of political power in the West facilitated the emergence of economic systems such as feudalism and capitalism, within which class conflicts became increasingly pronounced. Within this historical trajectory, relations of slavery and exploitation constituted the long-term historical reality of what is now referred to as the Western experience of the welfare society. From the standpoint of present outcomes, the misery experienced during traditional periods in the West eventually led to a relatively well-ordered socioeconomic structure. In contrast, the Turkish-Ottoman experience—particularly in the classical period of Ottoman society—was marked by a traditional social order upheld by the state's centralized authority. However, in the context of modern developments, exposure to external influences often led to disorder and instability, culminating in an unfavorable outcome marked by chaos and disruption. The painful transformations that emerged amid confusion during the late Ottoman period gained considerable momentum with the establishment of the Republic. Despite challenging conditions, notable achievements were made in the first 15 years of the Republic, especially in advancing the goal of becoming a developed society. Although the tone of this pursuit has varied over time, the ideals of development and progress have consistently retained their significance in Türkiye; yet, the tasks associated with these aspirations have never been fully completed.

At the current juncture, the experience shaped by global capitalism has grown considerably more complex; the stark contrast between societies in which systems function smoothly and those marked by institutional failure and chaos has yet to yield a more humane, just, and equitable balance. There exists a widespread call for a better world, voiced across various levels—scientific, political, literary, and beyond. This study aims to analyze the developmental trajectories of the West and Türkiye from the standpoint of capitalist development and, based on ongoing debates, to evaluate Türkiye's current opportunities and challenges. With its strong historical, cultural, social, and economic capacities, Türkiye has the potential to play a significant role in transforming an increasingly restless world into a more peaceful planet. In this regard, it is deemed essential to reflect on Türkiye's historical reality and future possibilities as a nation and society capable of contributing meaningfully to such a transformation.

This study used a historical comparative method with an interpretive approach. The historical comparative research method is well-suited to addressing major questions, as it allows us to examine how significant social changes occurred, why they happened, and how fundamental social arrangements differed across societies.² Although some studies within the historical comparative method adopt a positivist, quantitative approach, others apply the method on a qualitative, interpretive, and critical basis.³ In this sense, our study is structured as a qualitative interpretive study in the second group's

² W. Lawrence Neuman, *Toplumsal Araştırma Yöntemleri II*, trans., Sedef Özge, 8th. Ed. (Ankara: Yayın Odası, 2016), p. 604.

³ Neuman, *Ibid*, p. 605

method. This is because, rather than accepting that there are positive sociological laws that guide and shape historical processes and conditions, this study is shaped by an acceptance of history and society as shaped by preferences, efforts, human actions, and social constructions that require interpretation.

Neuman⁴ states that historical comparative analysis is organised in three dimensions. These are the scope dimension, which relates to whether the research is directed at a single nation or more than one; the time dimension, which indicates whether the study covers the past, the present, or a long historical period; and the data dimension, which indicates whether the data is qualitative or quantitative. In this sense, our study aims to qualitatively interpret changes across multiple nations over a broad historical period. Again, with respect to the nature of the data used in the study, this work is based on the historical-comparative and sociological interpretation of data from the works of historians who have specialised in studying primary archival sources over many years, as stated by Neuman.⁵

1. The Economic Codes of Traditional Social Order in Europe and Türkiye

Socioeconomic structures can be regarded as constructed realities that emerge from the historically embedded actions of socially situated individuals. However, as articulated through Anthony Giddens' concept of *structuration*⁶, such realities originate in individual action but ultimately constitute the normative framework that shapes and guides those very actions. For instance, in any given community, the socioeconomic structure—formed over a long historical span—becomes the primary factor shaping, directing, and even constraining individuals' economic behavior. It influences whether individuals become rich or poor, whether they find themselves in economic equality or inequality, and further, whether they perceive the inequality they live in as a normal and acceptable condition or as a problem to be contested. While the positivist perspective tends to disregard the *constructive role* of human agency, interpretivist approaches within the social sciences offer a more favorable view of this process. This distinction, which points to a methodological divergence in analysis, should be understood as the result of fundamentally different conceptions of the human subject.

In pre-capitalist societies, the most prominent criterion shaping the socioeconomic structure was land ownership. This is because during those periods, land was the central element of agricultural production, accounting for almost the entirety of economic activity. Although many characteristics of traditional societies appear to resemble one another on a universal scale, the organization of agricultural production varied significantly, and these variations ultimately became the foundational criteria for different economic systems. Fundamentally, what led societies to develop distinct economic organizations was the *economic mentality* that regulated individuals' relationships with the material

⁴ Neuman, *Ibid*, p. 605-606.

⁵ Neuman, *Ibid*, p. 621.

⁶ Anthony Elliot, *Çağdaş Sosyal Teoriye Giriş*, trans., Aylin Görgün Baran (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2017), p. 171.

world and their economic behaviors. At this point, it is helpful to recall Sabri F. Ülgener's⁷ emphasis on the relationship and distinction between *economic mentality* (*iktisat zihniyeti*) and *economic ethics* (*iktisat ahlakı*). According to Ülgener, *economic ethics* refers to the set of norms and behavioral rules that are prescribed. In contrast, *economic mentality* refers to the totality of values and beliefs that individuals genuinely uphold in their actual economic conduct. In other words, economic mentality does not merely remain an inward-looking ideal or a longing related to the economic sphere; rather, it manifests as a lived and practiced mode of existence—effectively becoming a tangible, almost palpable, social reality.

In this regard, it becomes essential to compare the social conditions that culminated in Western European capitalism—and more importantly, the fundamental features of the Western mentality that interpreted these conditions as the basis for individual behavior—with the Ottoman society, which positioned itself within a markedly different semantic and cultural universe, far removed from those Western frameworks. Such a comparison is thought to offer valuable insight into whether, and to what extent, the socio-economic structures and transformations that shaped these distinct social contexts—particularly in terms of the state–individual relationship—served as foundations for the development of capitalism.

1.1. Basic Notes on the Historical Development of the Socioeconomic Structure in Europe

In defining the boundaries of the geographical area where feudalism prevailed and capitalism emerged, it is essential to consider both the region's location and its name. In the introduction to his work, *Feudal Society*, Marc Bloch acknowledges that readers might expect him to use the expression "Western and Central Europe" in the subsequent pages. Yet, he states that he prefers the term "Europe." He explains that his choice is not merely intended to spare the reader from repeatedly encountering lengthy and cumbersome descriptive phrases, but also because—according to the ancient geographical classifications and, albeit loosely, according to specific historical analyses—Europe, while not culturally homogeneous, can still be regarded as possessing a vague yet discernible cultural unity.⁸ Leaving aside the impossibility of speaking of a continental and cultural unity of Europe during the Roman era, the issue of Europe's cohesion becomes even more complex in light of the political fragmentation that emerged over time—especially in Eastern Europe under Ottoman rule. The fact that capitalism began to take root under the feudal conditions of Western and Central Europe, regions outside Ottoman dominion, has rendered the emphasis on *Western* Europe a customary and, to some extent, a rational preference in socioeconomic-historical analyses of the region. In this sense, while Europe became politically fragmented during the periods of Ottoman influence, it had previously—under Roman influence—at least relatively displayed a form of cultural unity. Bloch himself notes that although Europe expanded during the Romano-Germanic period, it remained surrounded by Muslim, Byzantine, and Slavic

⁷ Sabri F. Ülgener, *İktisadi Çözülmenin Ahlak ve Zihniyet Dünyası* (İstanbul: Derin Yayınları, 2006), p. 17.

⁸ Marc Bloch, *Feodal Toplum*, trans., Melek Fırat (İstanbul: Kırmızı Yayınları, 2007), p. 30.

blocs, and that the constituent elements of this structure, due to their historical differences, were unable to form a true cultural homogeneity. According to Bloch, these differences also played a role in the divergent trajectories of European peoples' future evolution and transformation.⁹

Wiesner-Hanks argues that Europe is less a geographical determination than a conceptual construct aimed at distinguishing "us" from "them," and in this sense, posits that Europe is an idea born out of culture.¹⁰ Wiesner-Hanks argues that the term "Europe" gives rise to considerable conceptual confusion. In this context, she notes that even the textbook definition of a continent—as a landmass surrounded by water—does not neatly apply to Europe. She notes that, in an effort to classify their cities as European, the Russians attempted to draw the boundary between Asia and Europe along rivers that could not even run north to south. She also mentions the complications surrounding questions such as whether the history of the Ottoman Empire—a Turkish empire—should be considered part of European history. Despite these complexities, Wiesner-Hanks observes that even those who find the term "Europe" problematic continue to use it because of its perceived meaningfulness and utility, highlighting the concept's functional value.¹¹ In short, despite all its complexities and the technical challenges of classifying it as a continent, it is evident—based on the references above—that speaking of a European entity at the cultural level remains meaningful. However, although Bloch states his preference for using “Europe” as a term encompassing the entire continent, this study deliberately opts to employ more specific geographical designations—such as Western, Central, and Northern Europe—which refer to the regions that developed feudalism and remained outside the economic regime of the Ottoman Empire.

In distinguishing between the parts of Europe dominated by feudalism and those under the Ottoman *tımar* system, *İlber Ortaylı's analysis, based on the geographical distribution of the tımar system, proves particularly significant. According to his assessment, tımar and zeamet lands were concentrated mainly in proximate provinces where central control was relatively strong—such as Central Anatolia and the Balkans. In contrast, in distant provinces such as Mesopotamia, Baghdad, Basra, and Buda, as well as overseas territories like Caffa and Cyprus, the number of lands included within the tımar system was notably lower. It must be emphasized that the functioning of the tımar system did not remain the same across the entire empire.¹² Similarly, İnalçık points out that the system was not uniformly applied across all regions, noting that certain provinces, such as Egypt and Buda (Budın), possessed a degree of fiscal autonomy.¹³ In short, much as in Anatolia, the functioning of the tımar system in parts of Eastern Europe prevented these regions from undergoing the same feudal social developments as the*

⁹ Bloch, *Ibid*, p. 30.

¹⁰ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Erken Modern Dönemde Avrupa 1450-1789*, trans., Hamit Çalışkan, 6th ed. (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019), p. 3.

¹¹ Wiesner-Hanks, *Ibid*, p. 2-5.

¹² İlber Ortaylı, *Türkiye Teşkilât ve İdare Tarihi*, 5th ed. (Ankara: Cedit Yayınları, 2016), p. 132-133.

¹³ Halil İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Klasik Çağ (1300-1600)*, trans., Ruşen Sezer, 7th ed. (İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2006), p. 121.

rest of Europe. In other words, these geographies - similar to Anatolia - were characterized by specific structural factors, foremost among them the absence of capital accumulation, which inhibited the flourishing of capitalism.

Following these observations concerning geography and its classification, it is now possible to address the fundamental characteristics of the land tenure system in Western Europe and the historical conditions under which it took shape.

Özyüksel analyzes the historical trajectory of Rome—from monarchy to republic and then to empire—and explains how the transition from the Roman Empire to feudalism unfolded following the empire's dissolution.¹⁴ According to this analysis, Rome expanded rapidly from a tribal federation known as *Populus Romanus*, embarking on a swift campaign of conquest and territorial growth. This expansion was further facilitated by the relative absence of significant resistance, particularly in the Italian peninsula. As conquered lands steadily increased, the amount of land allocated to families grew within Rome's distinctive political and social organization, leading to the emergence of large estates—*latifundia*—which became symbolic indicators of large-scale landownership. Even when land was distributed equally among families, those who owned less fertile land gradually fell behind economically compared to families with more productive land, ending up on the disadvantaged side of an emerging inequality. These impoverished families became increasingly alienated from landownership, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the *plebeian* class (*plebs*) in Roman cities, whose subsistence was supported by the fiscally strong Roman state.¹⁵ These developments elucidate how Rome—an empire that left an indelible mark on world history through its monarchical, republican, and imperial phases—could, despite its majestic authority, eventually give way to a feudal system that emerged out of the weakening of centralized state power. Unlike the historically strong and often *despotic* centralized states of the East, Rome, even at the peak of its power, appears to have exacerbated the class distinctions that would ultimately evolve into the foundations of feudalism.

During the period known as the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace), the Roman Empire reached its natural borders and, through the development of extensive transportation and infrastructure, laid the foundations for a robust commercial zone. The domestic class-based consumption order, which demanded the importation of luxury goods, led to a trade deficit. Over time, this contributed to the weakening of public finances and led to inflation, ultimately undermining the state's authority.¹⁶ Subsequent analyses concerning the Ottoman Empire reveal that a similar pattern of dissolution unfolded—namely, the gradual transition from a centralized state to emerging feudal structures. Although this process never fully matured in the Ottoman context, it manifested as a more ambiguous and problematic phenomenon compared to its Western counterpart. This is because, in the West, the process culminated in far more radical transformations, eventually evolving into capitalism—a development that endowed the West with global power. In

¹⁴ Murat Özyüksel, *Feodalite ve Osmanlı Toplumunu* (İstanbul: Derin Yayınları, 2007), p. 11-33.

¹⁵ Özyüksel, *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

¹⁶ Özyüksel, *Ibid.*, p. 19-21.

contrast, the belated emergence of feudal structures within the Ottoman and later Turkish context became a significant obstacle to the realization of desired reforms, breakthroughs, and development strategies.

In conclusion, following the grandeur of Rome, Europe entered a period widely regarded as one of ruralization. This transition marked the beginning of the feudal society—an era that, while resulting in prolonged hardship and widespread poverty, later came to be viewed as the historical foundation of modernity, which ultimately imparted a sense of triumph to Western Europe. Marc Bloch notes that the early proponents of the term *feudalism* perceived its defining characteristic as opposition to the idea of a centralized state. In this sense, feudalism signified the fragmentation of authority into various forms of localized power over people. Bloch cites an example from Henri Lefebvre, in which a municipal official in 18th-century France blamed rising food prices on the large landowners—that is, on feudalism itself—which, for Bloch, illustrates how the chaos generated by feudal structures was still readily understood centuries later.¹⁷ In this sense, feudalism can be described as a regime of land, economy, and society characterized by the dissolution of the state's regulatory authority within a fragmented field of power struggles—rendering public life deeply problematic through entrenched inequality and hierarchy.

Bloch states that the feudal order corresponds to a societal condition in which impoverished communities were economically dependent on a small number of power-holding individuals. This order emerged as a synthesis of the Roman *villa*—the spatial organization of Roman lords—and the village chieftaincies of the invading Germanic tribes. It came to represent a form of social organization grounded in the exploitation of humans by other humans. This synthesis enabled not only the extraction of profit from the land but also the acquisition of governing authority. As Pirenne's¹⁸ explanations make clear, by the end of the eighth century, Western Europe had become almost entirely agrarian, and land had become the sole source of livelihood and the exclusive condition for wealth. From the emperor—who possessed no income other than what he gained from land—to the most modest serf, all segments of the population survived on the products of the land. Movable wealth had virtually no relevance in economic life. Every form of social existence was based either on land ownership or on access to its use, and the state had no means of maintaining a system of governance or military structure that was not grounded in this foundation. As a result, members of the military—whose roles corresponded to the *timar* holders in the Ottoman system—were drawn from fief holders, and administrators came from among the great landowners. Under such conditions, the head of state couldn't maintain sovereign authority. In principle, sovereignty may have existed, but in practice, it was absent. For this reason, Pirenne aptly defines the feudal system as "the disintegration of public authority into the hands

¹⁷ Bloch, *Ibid*, p. 730.

¹⁸ Henri Pirenne, *Ortaçağ Avrupa'sının Ekonomik ve Sosyal Tarihi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), trans., Uygur Kocabaşoğlu, p. 15.

of independent agents, each holding a portion of land and viewing the delegated power as an inheritable right.”¹⁹

For this reason, a more detailed understanding of the feudal order necessitates beginning with the *lords*—those who held power within the system. The lords constituted a category of authority formed through the convergence of the Roman land aristocracy, symbolized by the *patricians*, and the war chiefs of the invading Germanic tribes. Living on their estates in a manner akin to that of monarchs, the lords maintained a hierarchical relationship with the king, defined as *primus inter pares*—the first among equals.²⁰ In other words, the king’s superiority over the *seigneur* was quite limited.

According to the logic of the system, the responsibility for cultivating the arable land of the manor belonged to the serfs. The serf class emerged as a hybrid category formed through the combination of Roman slaves, free peasants, and even free Germanic citizens.²¹ The cultivation of manorial lands by the serfs was organized through a division of the land into two distinct categories. The first of these, known as the *demesne*, consisted of the lord’s direct holdings—surrounding his residence and comprising the most valuable parts of the manor’s land. This area typically included the dwellings of laborers and slaves (if present), as well as storage buildings, stables, barns, kitchens, ovens, and various workshops such as those of carpenters and blacksmiths. The second category, called *mansus* plots, consisted of small peasant farms. The serfs who cultivated these small parcels of land allocated to them were required to share a portion of the harvest with the seigneur according to customary proportions. Additionally, they were obligated to perform corvée labor—unpaid, forced labor—on the *demesne* lands.²² As can be understood, the products obtained through cultivation on the *demesne* were not subject to sharing; the seigneur appropriated the entire yield.

The collapse of Roman authority also entailed the decline of urban life and the deterioration of well-maintained, secure roads, which, in turn, led to a significant reduction in trade and craftsmanship in feudal Western European society. As a result, artisans sought refuge on manorial estates, effectively becoming serfs. Nonetheless, limited trade persisted to meet the demand for certain commercial goods. Manor inhabitants could barter their surplus products with the surplus goods of other manors. These exchanges typically took place at markets held at regular intervals.²³

It would not be inaccurate to include the Church within the class structure of feudal society, which was primarily composed of serfs and lords. Indeed, Özyüksel supports Huberman’s depiction of the principal actors in feudal society as “those who fight, those who work, and those who pray”²⁴—that is, lords, serfs, and the Church. He argues that this classification is valid, as the clergy, owning manors and commanding serfs, could

¹⁹ Pirenne, *Ibid*, p. 16.

²⁰ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 51.

²¹ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 52.

²² Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 53-54.

²³ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 56-57.

²⁴ Leo Huberman, *Feodal Toplumdan Yirminci Yüzyıla*, trans., Murat Belge (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017), , p. 11.

effectively be considered part of the seigneurial class.²⁵ Thus, the clergy who defended and legitimized the feudal social order, along with the warrior oligarchy—both belonging to the seigneurial class—constituted the segment that benefited from the system.²⁶ In contrast, serfs or semi-serfs were, in every sense—economic, social, and legal—entirely the “subjects” of the seigneur on whose land they lived and worked. Interestingly, however, Pirenne characterizes this unequal system of exploitation as patriarchal in nature. He argues that just as the eldest member of a family is expected to protect the other members, the seigneur was also responsible for safeguarding the serfs in times of war—albeit out of self-interest. The seigneur, after all, depended on the labor and production of the serfs.²⁷ Even so, Pirenne’s approach is insufficient to mitigate the system’s exploitative nature. The human rights violations inherent in the feudal order, later mirrored in the colonial exploitation of peripheral countries during the era of commercial mercantilism, and ultimately in the capitalist factory system’s treatment of the working class—all within the framework of the West’s colonial logic—reveal the long-standing history of poverty and disorder endured within Europe itself.

Nonetheless, Bloch argues that, if one were to map feudalism within the sphere of Western civilization, contrary to common assumptions, there would be vast regions where it never entirely took root. He maintains that the state did not wholly vanish and that, in areas where state authority remained relatively strong, it was even possible to speak of isolated zones of freedom outside the feudal order. Based on the premise that no human institution can ever achieve perfection, Bloch notes that in these relatively free environments, the prevailing practice was not the oath of subordination typical of feudal dependency, but rather a mutual oath—an indicator of liberty.²⁸ Bloch’s attempt to mitigate the heavy human burden of feudalism through such an approach ultimately reveals an internal contradiction. For, as he himself acknowledges, it is evident that social institutions can never function in a state of perfection. The very factors that created the relatively free environments he describes were insufficient to prevent feudalism from becoming the dominant social order in medieval Western Europe.

At this point, it is possible to transition to an evaluation of the debates on feudalism in Ottoman-Turkish history, using Western feudalism—as a concrete historical reality—as a continuous point of comparison. In fact, such a comparison risks positioning one society as “advanced” and the other as “backward.” However, the aim here is certainly not to construct categories of progressive versus regressive societies, nor to defend against such approaches. Instead, the objective is to explain the fundamental characteristics of the Ottoman-Turkish socio-economic structure in terms of its historical specificity and to explore why capitalism did not emerge from within this particular social formation. This endeavor is also considered significant for understanding the distinctive conditions under which contemporary Turkish society has been incorporated into the capitalist age.

²⁵ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 57.

²⁶ Bloch, *Ibid*, p. 733.

²⁷ Pirenne, *Ibid*, p. 77-78.

²⁸ Bloch, *Ibid*, p. 736-737.

1.2. Fundamental Characteristics of the Socio-Economic Structure in Ottoman Turkish History

There is little consensus among social scientists on how to define the socio-economic structure of the Ottoman-Turkish context. From the standpoint of contemporary realities, it is evident that this subject has given rise to highly contentious and often contradictory interpretations. While scholars such as Ömer Lütfi Barkan, Fuat Köprülü, Sabri F. Ülgener, and many other historians of the Ottoman Empire assess its socio-economic structure, institutions, and institutional functions within the framework of historical specificity, others offer markedly different characterizations. Among these are Behice Boran²⁹, who describes Ottoman society as feudal; Muzaffer Sencer³⁰ and Sencer Divitçioğlu³¹, who interpret it through the lens of the Asiatic Mode of Production (ATÜT); and Niyazi Berkes³², who classifies it as a form of Oriental despotism. It is worth noting that ideological positioning plays a significant role in shaping these diverse perspectives. Addressing the issue empirically and objectively presents its own challenges; however, engaging in an analytical discussion remains crucial for attaining a deeper understanding of historical truth. Although the Ottoman Empire has collapsed and the Republic of Türkiye has been established, both states were founded by the Turks, and the Ottoman society that once inhabited the territory of modern-day Türkiye is essentially continuous with the post-Republic Turkish society.* Therefore, the Ottoman-Turkish socio-economic structure—developed under unique historical conditions—remains a significant historical factor shaping the present.

Within this framework, a significant analysis regarding the socio-economic foundations of Turkish society in Ottoman history belongs to Mehmet Genç. Genç's analysis serves as a valuable analytical resource not only for understanding the socio-economic structure historically experienced by Anatolian Turks, but also for grasping the specific conditions under which this structure has shaped—or is compelled to shape—Turkish society's relationship with capitalism today. In this regard, Genç states that the core features of the Ottoman state—which took shape gradually between the 14th and 16th centuries—are commonly referred to as the “classical” characteristics of the Empire. According to him, these classical institutional structures remained largely intact and functioned without undergoing any radical transformation until the first half of the 19th century.³³ Genç argues that it is difficult to speak of a clearly defined economic policy

²⁹ Behice Boran, *Türkiye ve Sosyalizm Sorunları* (İstanbul: Gün Yayınları, 1968), p. 4'ten akt. Erdi Aksakal, *Sosyolojik Açıdan Osmanlı Toplum Yapısı İsimler, Kavramlar* (Ankara: Gece Akademi, 2018), p. 100.

³⁰ Muzaffer Sencer, *Osmanlı Toplum Yapısı Eleştirel Bir Yaklaşım*, 2nd ed. (İstanbul: Sarmal Yayınevi, 1999), p. 226.

³¹ Sencer Divitçioğlu, *Asya Tipi Üretim Tarzı ve Osmanlı Toplumunu* (İstanbul: Alfa Yayınları, 2015), p. 121-125.

³² Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye İktisat Tarihi*, 6th ed. (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2023), p.91.

* The ethnic origins and religious identity of the Ottoman principality have been the subject of various interpretations and debates in the scholarly literature. For assessments concerning how the Ottoman Muslim-Turkish identity was constructed and historically positioned, see: Selim Hilmi Özkan, “Osmanlı Kuruluş Meselesi ve Osmanlı Kimliği”, *Osmanlı Tarihi I*, İstanbul: İdeal Kültür Yayıncılık, 2019, p. 3-13.

³³ Mehmet Genç, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Devlet ve Ekonomi*, 4th ed. (İstanbul: Ötüken Yayınları, 2005), p. 43.

in the Ottoman Empire—one guided by an organizational structure assigned strictly economic functions with specific aims and scope. Instead, he asserts that the financial sphere was shaped by an administrative mechanism that fully integrated political, military, religious, and bureaucratic functions.³⁴ In short, it is not possible to speak of a specialized, highly disciplined form of economic governance in the Ottoman Empire, as observed in capitalist and modern nation-states.

To explain the deeply intertwined nature of the economic institution with other elements of Ottoman society's social structure, Genç employs the metaphor of “sugar dissolved in tea.” Just as the sugar dissolved in tea cannot be separated from it, so too is it difficult to isolate economic phenomena from the complex web of religion, politics, morality, and familial relations. The fact that financial matters were considered alongside other institutional functions illustrates that economics in the Ottoman context was not solely a matter of state administration or bureaucratic organization, but also a dimension of broader social relations. Moreover, the treatment of economic phenomena by specialized administrations as subjects of science and politics is a development specific to the modern era.³⁵

The importance attributed to economic phenomena varies depending on the underlying societal assumptions—or economic mentality—upon which economic systems are based. Indeed, in the Ottoman economic mentality, the significance assigned to economic events was not as central or dominant as in capitalist societies. Genç identifies that the prevailing economic worldview in Ottoman social life, particularly between 1500 and 1800, was based on three interrelated principles that functioned as the supporting pillars of a unified system. The first of these principles, the *provisioning principle* (*işe ilkesi*),³⁶ distinguishes between two categorical aspects of economic behavior: the desire to sell, based on profit maximization, and the desire, as a consumer, to access abundant, high-quality, and affordable goods. It reflects the Ottoman system's prioritization of the latter—the consumer's need—over the seller's profit motive. In other words, rather than emphasizing the role of the profitable seller, the system valued and prioritized the satisfaction of the adequately supplied consumer. The *reaya* (tax-paying subjects) were not to face any difficulty in accessing essential goods. This notion forms the basis of the *price ceiling regulation* (*narh*), which will be discussed later.

The second principle, *traditionalism* (*gelenekçilik*)³⁷, emerged as a formalized attitude following the prolonged implementation of the provisioning principle. It reflects a sensitivity toward maintaining the socio-economic equilibrium that had gradually developed under the provisioning-based order. The fundamental rationale behind traditionalism lies in the impulse to preserve this balance. Even in the face of change, the strategy was to return to the established traditional equilibrium, especially when its benefits were not in doubt. According to Genç, the most compelling reason for maintaining ba-

³⁴ Genç, *Ibid*, p. 43.

³⁵ Genç, *Ibid*, p. 44.

³⁶ Genç, *Ibid*, p. 45.

³⁷ Genç, *Ibid*, p. 48.

lance was the fear of famine—a disaster most dreaded in traditional economies. Therefore, one of the most essential conditions for achieving and preserving equilibrium between production and consumption was avoiding wastefulness (*israf*).

The third principle, *fiscalism*³⁸ (*fiskalizm*), refers to the state's aim of maximizing public revenue or, at the very least, preventing a decline in existing income levels. However, in traditional Ottoman society, increasing state revenues was not as straightforward as it may seem. First and foremost, productivity* was low due to technological limitations at the time, and transportation was both costly and challenging. Moreover, if the sphere of trade and exchange were to expand—i.e., if monetary relations intensified—those engaged in commerce would accumulate wealth and potentially gain power. From the perspective of the central authority, the emergence and empowerment of such autonomous groups were not desirable outcomes, as they threatened to destabilize the existing social and political balance. As a result, the Ottoman social order and institutions were shaped by a mentality that, on the one hand, aimed to secure conditions sufficient to meet the basic needs of the *reaya*. On the other hand, it deliberately sought to prevent productive forces from evolving into autonomous centers of power that might challenge the authority of the central state. As Genç notes³⁹, it is difficult to fully understand many Ottoman institutions and practices—ranging from the *miri* (state-owned) land system to the price-fixing regulations (*narh*), from capitulations and state monopolies to guild organizations and import regimes—without considering the influence of this underlying economic mentality.

When examining the fundamental components of the Ottoman social structure, without disregarding the aforementioned principles of the Ottoman economic mentality, it becomes evident that agricultural production was intricately linked to both the military system and the fiscal order. Within this network of relations, three leading actors can be identified: the *reaya*, the *timariotsipahis* (*land-granted cavalymen*), and the state. However, before analyzing the roles and interactions of these three agents, it is essential to outline the basic characteristics of the land regime—particularly the *miri* land system.

³⁸ Genç, *Ibid*, p. 50-51.

*Şevket Pamuk notes that in the 16th century, approximately ninety percent of the population in Anatolia and Istanbul lived in rural areas, and a significant portion of this population was composed of nomadic groups rather than settled agriculturalists. The share of the population engaged in agriculture remained relatively limited when compared to the total size of arable land. Due to the inadequacy of transportation technologies, it was not feasible to produce agricultural goods for distant markets, particularly in inland regions. For instance, a substantial portion of Istanbul's grain supply was procured via maritime routes from the Balkans and the Aegean coast. In contrast, grain transportation from interior regions relied on camels and proved to be highly expensive. Moreover, during this century, nearly ninety percent of the land used in Ottoman society was cultivated through dry farming methods. In Anatolia, the predominant agricultural technology relied on household labor and a primitive wooden plough (*karasaban*) drawn by a pair of oxen. Wheat and barley were the most essential crops. Although yields varied by region, the average productivity of wheat is estimated to have been around 700–800 kilograms per hectare. For detailed information, see: Şevket Pamuk, *Osmanlı-Türkiye İktisadi Tarihi 1500–1914* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007), pp. 37–40; Halil Cin, *Osmanlı Toprak Düzeni ve Bu Düzenin Bozulması*, 2nd ed., (Istanbul: Boğaziçi Yayınları, 1985), pp. 58–59.

³⁹ Genç, *Ibid*, p. 52.

Miri land refers to property owned by the state, with the right of usufruct granted to individuals. Since Islamic law does not conceptualize a separation between the state and the sovereign, all lands acquired through conquest were formally considered the sultan's property. However, it is crucial not to conflate the sultan's symbolic ownership with the state's sovereign authority. This distinction is particularly significant in determining the legal nature of the relationship between the sultan and the *tumariots*. In this arrangement, the state allocates a portion of *miri* land to a *tumariot* in exchange for military service. The *tumariot* does not own the land but merely holds the right to collect taxes from the *reaya* on behalf of the state. In return, the *tumariot* is obliged to raise and maintain several cavalry soldiers (*cebelü*) proportionate to the income generated from the land, supply their equipment, and participate in military campaigns when summoned. In essence, the relationship between the sultan (as the sovereign) and the *tumariot* is one defined by public law, encompassing military, administrative, and fiscal obligations. Thus, the *tumariot* is not a private landowner but an army official who represents and enforces state authority within the boundaries of the allocated *dirlik* (also known as *timar*).⁴⁰

The *timar* lands granted to *sipahis* were classified into three categories according to their annual revenue. The *has* category, allocated to high-ranking individuals such as princes (*şehzades*), viziers, and provincial governors (*beylerbeyi*), consisted of estates generating more than 100,000 *akçes* annually. The holders of these *has* lands were required to provide one fully equipped cavalry soldier (*cebelü*) for every 5,000 *akçes* of income. The *zeamet* category, granted to mid-level officials such as *subaşı*s, treasurers (*defterdar*) of provincial capitals, and regiment commanders (*alay beyi*) in the *sancaks*, comprised estates yielding between 20,000 and 99,999 *akçes* annually; these holders were also obliged to provide one *cebelü* per 5,000 *akçes*. Finally, the standard *timar*, typically granted to soldiers in recognition of their distinguished battlefield service, included estates producing up to 19,999 *akçes* annually. Holders of such *timars* were required to provide one *cebelü* for every 3,000 *akçes*. The primary source of income for *sipahis* was the portion of taxes they collected known as *kılıç* (literally "sword share"). For *zeamet* holders, the *kılıç* was typically 20,000 *akçes*, whereas for *timar* holders it ranged between 2,000 and 6,000 *akçes*, depending on whether the grant was certified (*tezkereli*) or uncertified (*tezkeresiz*).⁴¹ The *sipahi*, as the holder of a *dirlik* or *timar*, was not entitled to transfer the entire estate to his heirs; the portion that could be inherited was typically limited to the minimum share known as the *kılıç*. This restriction was a deliberate measure instituted to prevent the accumulation of wealth and the emergence of a feudal landowning class among the *sipahis*.⁴² Apart from this measure, the Ottoman state also implemented other precautions⁴³ to prevent *sipahis* from gaining power that could lead to their independence. The land granted to the *sipahi* was recorded in two separate registers: the *mufassal* register and the *icmal* register. The former documented

⁴⁰ Halil Cin, *Osmanlı Toprak Düzeni ve Bu Düzenin Bozulması*, 2nd ed., (İstanbul: Boğaziçi Yayınları, 1985), p. 58-59.

⁴¹ Cin, *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁴² Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 185.

⁴³ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 182-185.

the village population, the lands, the crops cultivated in those villages, and the share of these crops owed to the state as tax. The latter showed the amount, type, and location of the lands allocated to a *sipahi*. In this way, the distribution of tax revenues to *sipahis* was strictly monitored through a dual record-keeping system. Moreover, upon every change of sultan, *sipahis* who held *tumars* with official certification (*tezkereli*) were required to have their certification approved by the new sultan. The sultan/state legally retained the authority to renew these warrants, thus enabling periodic checks on whether a noble class was emerging. If it was determined that a *sipahi* had become excessively powerful, the sultan could confiscate part or all of the *timar*—a practice known as *müsadere*. Strong *timar* holders could also be relocated to break their social and economic influence in their home region. As a result, *tumariot sipahis* in classical Ottoman society could not become feudal lords who owned and operated large estates, as was the case in Western Europe. However, once the classical order deteriorated, *sipahis* began to claim authority over the lands from which they collected taxes, and local lordships (*derebeylik*) emerged. Berkes, employing a Marxist perspective, characterizes *derebeylik* as the antithesis of the *timar* system.⁴⁴

On the other side of the *sipahi*'s relationship with the state stood their ties with the *reaya*. The *reaya* comprised four main groups: settled farmers and peasants, nomadic pastoralists, artisans and craftsmen in towns and cities, and merchants and service-sector workers.⁴⁵ In short, the *reaya* comprised three main groups: peasants engaged in agricultural production, artisans engaged in various crafts, and merchants engaged in trade. It is generally understood that the first two groups were predominantly Muslim, whereas the third group was largely non-Muslim. Given their distinct economic roles and characteristics, these groups must be analyzed separately.

Halil Cin states⁴⁶ that there were two legal dimensions to the relationship between the *sipahi* and the *reaya*. First, allowing the *reaya* to cultivate and use land whose ownership belonged to the state, on behalf of the state; and second, collecting the taxes that the *reaya* owed to the state in exchange for this usage, again on behalf of the state. At this point, it becomes essential to identify the central taxes paid by the *reaya*. Although the *tapu resmi* (land registration tax) may be the first to come to mind, it did not constitute a significant portion of the *sipahi*'s income. The *sipahi*'s principal source of revenue consisted of various *shar'î* (Islamic law-based) and *örfi* (customary law-based) taxes, which they were entitled to collect from the *reaya* in their own name. While certain taxes, such as the sheep tax (*koyun resmi*), *bac* (market tax), *aşar* (tithe), and taxes in return for certain forms of corvée labor, were imposed uniformly on both Muslim and non-Muslim *reaya*, the taxes known as *raiyyet rüsûmu* were organized on a different basis.⁴⁷ The *raiyyet rüsûmu*—also referred to as the *çift resmi* (land tax) or *kulluk akçesi* (servitude fee)—represented the monetized equivalents of certain feudal services that,

⁴⁴ Berkes, *Ibid*, p. 54.

⁴⁵ Yaşar Baş, "Osmanlı Toplum Yapısı", *Osmanlı Tarihi 1*, Ed. Selim Hilmi Özkan (İstanbul: İdeal Kültür Yayıncılık, 2019), p. 272.

⁴⁶ Cin, *Ibid*, p. 59.

⁴⁷ Halil İnalcık, "Osmanlılarda Raiyyet Rüsümü", *Belleten*, C. 23, S. 92, Ankara, 1959, p. 576.

in Europe, had been performed by peasants for their lords, but were converted into cash obligations under the Ottoman system.⁴⁸ This taxation system required payment of 22 akçes for seven specific services. Within this context, the term *çift* denoted a plot of land that could be ploughed with a pair of oxen, typically ranging in size from 60 to 150 dönüms, depending on the soil quality. The central administration placed great emphasis on preserving the integrity of this land unit, permitting its division only into half a *çift* (*nîm çift*) at most. Further division was discouraged, as it was believed to result in significant revenue losses during tax collection.⁴⁹

It should be noted that not all peasants in Ottoman society were landholders. A poor peasant without land was called a *caba*; if married, he was known as a *caba bennak* and paid a tax of 6 to 9 akçes. If unmarried, he was named a *caba mücerret*. In some regions, these individuals were entirely exempt from taxation. In contrast, others were required to pay a tax known as *resm-i mücerret* upon reaching working age or becoming economically active.⁵⁰ Every non-Muslim subject, whether Christian or Jewish, was required to pay not only the *jizya* but also an additional head tax composed of 25 akçes called *ispence* and 6 akçes known as *bîve resmi*. However, if they converted to Islam, they would no longer pay *ispence* and instead would be subject to the *bennak* tax.⁵¹

The *raiyyet rüsûmu* (peasant taxes) were not solely a matter of Ottoman fiscal policy but also constituted a tax category that played a crucial role in determining social classes. Because these taxes were specific to the *reaya*, *askeriye* (members of the military-administrative class) were exempt not only from *raiyyet rüsûmu* but also from many other associated taxes. All public servants receiving salaries or *timar* grants, members of the palace household, *ümera* (state dignitaries), and *ulema* (religious scholars) were categorized as part of the military-administrative class. This classification also included the *kapıkulu* corps and the state elites, *sipahis*, *kadis* (judges), *muftis*, *müderris* (professors), students and graduates of higher madrasas, as well as the relatives and retainers of all these groups. As members of this privileged class, they were exempt from paying the *raiyyet rüsûmu*, the taxes explicitly levied on the *reaya*.⁵²

Regardless of whether they were Muslim or non-Muslim, the primary obligation of the *reaya* was to cultivate the land they were entitled to operate and to pay their taxes. Beyond that, the *reaya* was considered free and autonomous. However, this should not be mistaken for “freedom” in the modern liberal sense—indeed, it would be anachronistic to speak of such a concept in that historical context. What is meant here is that the Ottoman peasant was not a “serf” in the Western European sense.⁵³ According to Barkan, the primary reason for this was the state's prolonged and ultimately decisive struggle against classes based on lineage and landed aristocracy. This situation, which

⁴⁸ İnalçık, “Osmanlılarda Raiyyet Rüsûmu”, p. 581.

⁴⁹ İnalçık, “Osmanlılarda Raiyyet Rüsûmu”, p. 582.

⁵⁰ İnalçık, “Osmanlılarda Raiyyet Rüsûmu”, p. 590-591.

⁵¹ İnalçık, “Osmanlılarda Raiyyet Rüsûmu”, p. 602-603.

⁵² İnalçık, “Osmanlılarda Raiyyet Rüsûmu”, p. 595.

⁵³ Berkes, *Ibid*, p. 54.

for a long time prevented individuals from owning land, can be attributed to the conception of the state as an imperial entity. Upon adopting the timar system in Anatolia, the Ottoman Empire seized every opportunity to absorb privately owned lands into state property to establish it in newly conquered territories where feudal principles had not yet been fully eradicated.⁵⁴ According to Barkan, the state's tendency was further reinforced by Islamic inheritance law, which required the division and distribution of family property among heirs. The partitioning of large estates into smaller plots over a few generations created opportunities for these smallholdings to be absorbed into state-owned land. In this context, it is possible to interpret *waqfs* established by descendants in villages and cities as reflecting a desire to preserve family unity and aristocratic property in the face of the fragmentary logic of Islamic inheritance law.⁵⁵

In the Ottoman land system, the state's generally retaining ultimate ownership and control of land is interpreted by Barkan as a form of nationalization—a process of attributing land to the nation and the state. According to this view, although those who cultivated the land had certain limitations on their rights of use, their connection to the land took the form of a hereditary and continuous tenancy. It should also be noted that these limitations were not severe enough to disturb advocates of freehold land ownership. In fact, everything proceeded as though the peasant were the actual owner of the land. Furthermore, the fact that the tax, which functioned as a form of rent, was determined according to the land's productivity, and that the right of use was passed from father to son, rendered the tenant status almost imperceptible. Nevertheless, under these conditions, peasants were deprived of many freedoms that came with full ownership rights—such as buying, selling, gifting, determining what to cultivate, and the liberty to use or leave the land fallow. When these rules were violated, the allocated land could be confiscated, and specific penalties, such as taxes, could be imposed.⁵⁶

Just as the *çift-hâne* (farmstead-household) system formed the foundation of agricultural production and rural society in the Ottoman Empire, the guild system constituted the cornerstone of the urban output and society. As Sencer notes,⁵⁷ the origins of the guild system lie in the *ahilik* (*futuwwa*) tradition. Emerging during the final years of the Seljuk period, *ahilik* referred to organizations in which individuals working in a particular craft (*murid*) gathered around a master (*pir* or *murshid*) who had attained expertise in the trade, and they adhered to the strict professional rules of the craft within a moral framework grounded in religious principles. Artisans such as goldsmiths, bakers, shoemakers, and tanners entered the *ahi* organization as apprentices and were expected to commit many years to training to become masters (*usta*). They were also required to pass difficult examinations under the supervision of existing masters successfully. Until the centralization of the Ottoman state, guilds were not only economic associations but also social institutions bound by strong communal ties, respectful of the religious and mystical codes of *ahilik*, and loyal to the *pir* as the representative of tradition. However,

⁵⁴ Ömer Lütfi Barkan, *Türkiye'de Toprak Meselesi* (İstanbul: Gözlem Yayınları, 1980), p. 281-282.

⁵⁵ Barkan, *Türkiye'de Toprak Meselesi*, p. 284-285.

⁵⁶ Barkan, *Türkiye'de Toprak Meselesi*, p. 294.

⁵⁷ Sencer, *Ibid*, p. 221-223.

after the late sixteenth century, a separation occurred between professional and religious functions. While the *ahilik* order continued to exist as a dervish lodge (*tekke*), the guilds remained as professional craft organizations. Nevertheless, the ethical principles of *fu-tuwwa* continued to exert a lasting influence within the guilds.

İnalçık⁵⁸ explains the primary rationale for the existence of guilds as professional organizations through their efforts to fulfill the fundamental requirements of economic supply and demand. In a perspective that parallels that of Mehmet Genç, İnalçık draws attention to the difficulty producers faced in accessing raw materials due to the poor transportation infrastructure of the period. Guild representatives would purchase raw materials wholesale from the market at fixed prices and distribute them to master craftsmen, thereby preventing them from falling into the hands of opportunistic speculators. In this way, guilds ensured that artisans could procure materials at reasonable prices and continue working without interruption. The second rationale for the existence of guilds was the need to organize production in line with the constraints of small, local markets.⁵⁹ In urban economies not oriented toward external trade, production needed to be aligned with the city's internal demand. In such limited economies, overproduction would lead to falling prices and losses for artisans, while underproduction would result in price inflation, harming consumers. To maintain a balance between the two, the political authority intervened to regulate the guild system's economic logic and ethical principles. One such mechanism was the *gedik* system, which regulated the number of producers in each trade according to the city's needs. For instance, while the town of Beypazarı was permitted to have only ten master bakers (or shops), this number was set at 150 for Istanbul. When unregistered bakers produced outside the sanctioned framework, the guild would report them to the state via the *kadı* (judge), thereby establishing a tight collaboration between the judiciary and the guild organization. Ultimately, the production-consumption equilibrium sustained by the guilds served the central authority's broader objective of maintaining order, stability, and a strong hold on political power.

On the other hand, the upper limit on the sale price of goods produced by guild masters—known as *narh*—was set by the *kadı* (judge). According to Akdağ⁶⁰, this price was not determined by market forces but rather through consultations with prominent local figures and the *muhtesib*, the official responsible for price regulation, who formally proposed the price. As a result, the fixed price was established in accordance with the purchasing power of the poor. Since workshops and shops were obliged to pay various taxes to the state based on tradition or special agreements, neither artisans nor merchants were ever able to accumulate capital. While in 15th- and 16th-century Europe merchants could afford to lend money to kings, in Ottoman society they had to content themselves with a livelihood that barely met subsistence levels.

⁵⁸ Halil İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Klasik Çağ (1300-1600)*, p. 162.

⁵⁹ Halil İnalçık, "Ahilik, Toplum ve Devlet", *Doğu Batı Makaleler II*, 4th Ed., (Ankara: Doğu Batı Yayınları, 2019), p. 85.

⁶⁰ Mustafa Akdağ, *Türkiye'nin İktisadi ve İctimai Tarihi Cilt II (1453-1559)*, (İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1995), p. 152-153.

However, it can be argued that the guilds of artisans normalized — even idealized — this situation. The ethical value system of the artisans, which Ülgener analyzes within the framework of *medieval morality*⁶¹, was shaped by a precapitalist worldview that had yet to materialize. The most influential factor in the formation of artisan ethics was various Sufi currents. Although Sufi morality emerged and developed in a context in which Islam valued trade and merchants, it paradoxically placed greater value on manual labor, much like the artisanal spirit of the early Christian saints who earned their livelihood through craftsmanship and whose religious beliefs were deeply intertwined with their work. Indeed, the moral code of the guilds encouraged artisans to be content with little, to be patient, and to practice submission (*tevekkül*), thereby assuming a disciplinary religious function that subdued the ego (*nefs*). The desire to suddenly become wealthy and prominent, refusing to accept one's daily share (*kismet*), was always condemned; instead, “moderation and balance” (*vasat ve itidal*) were recommended as guiding principles. For this reason, according to Ülgener⁶², medieval morality took pride in the artisan guilds — which were purely urban institutions — as if they were its own, while favoring the community of craftsmen over rootless, itinerant merchants and capitalists.

Therefore, it is evident that this economic ethos — inward-looking, static, and preferring poverty over wealth, thus bearing similarities to Catholic Christianity — could not embrace trade or the merchant class. Indeed, it is well known that in Ottoman society, trade was mainly in the hands of the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish communities. As Akdağ explains⁶³, although some local merchants — in addition to foreigners—were involved as “wholesale traders” who rented rooms and storage in inns to distribute imported goods to artisans, Jews in particular played a significant role. This was because commercial routes connecting western cities like Istanbul, Bursa, and Izmir with eastern cities such as Baghdad, Egypt, and Tabriz posed the logistical challenge of transporting hundreds of thousands of akçes by hand. However, Jewish merchants, operating in cooperation and solidarity within their community, functioned like branches of a modern bank. In practice, a merchant traveling from a western city to an eastern one would deposit his money with a local Jewish merchant and receive a signed letter — prepared and validated in the presence of a *kadı* (Islamic judge) — which he would then deliver to a second Jewish merchant at his destination. Once the identity and affiliation of the first merchant were confirmed before the *kadı* at the receiving end, the second Jewish merchant would hand over the full amount of money specified in the letter, enabling the traveler to make his purchases. Both merchants charged a fixed percentage fee for this remittance service. While Jewish merchants and financiers played a crucial role in trade finance, transportation was carried out by locals who, for a fee, provided pack animals such as horses, donkeys, mules, and camels—and often Jewish merchants themselves joined these caravans.

⁶¹ Ülgener, *Ibid*, p. 95.

⁶² Ülgener, *Ibid*, p. 96.

⁶³ Akdağ, *Ibid*, p. 145.

Pamuk notes that after the 16th century, the influence of Jews in credit, finance, and trade declined, while the power of Greek and Armenian communities increased.⁶⁴ By the late 17th century, Greek moneychangers had organized themselves into a guild and moved their businesses to the opposite shore of the Golden Horn, Galata. There, they specialized in international trade finance, leveraging the strength of Greek merchants in maritime trade across the Black Sea and the Balkans. Similarly, Armenian moneychangers established connections with Europe's commercial and financial networks through the Armenian community, while also cultivating close ties with the Ottoman bureaucracy. Especially after Greece gained its independence, Armenians rose in prominence even more rapidly. They became financial specialists in the provinces, playing a key role in the funding of trade and tax collection.

Interestingly, during the transformation of the Ottoman principality into an empire, the position of the Turkish population shifted increasingly from the center toward the periphery. Akdağ⁶⁵, in his analysis of this process, emphasizes that during the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror, Turks were not admitted into the Enderun Palace School, which was established to train future administrators. Instead, only boys recruited through the devşirme system from Christian families were accepted, and thus the administrative cadre necessary for governance was predominantly composed of this group. Nevertheless, economically, many Turks benefited from the state's various services and found relatively easy means of subsistence through institutions like *vakıfs* (charitable endowments). As a result, they remained largely content with the state and did not initially view its increasing distance from themselves as a problem. However, Turkish intellectuals became increasingly disturbed by the attitudes of devşirme-origin Ottoman elites who, particularly when the state order began to deteriorate, often saw Turks as rivals and disparaged the Anatolian population at every opportunity. For instance, Lütfi Pasha, the grand vizier of the Süleymanic era who rose from slavery, blamed the disorder of the Ottoman system solely on the Anatolian people — whom he referred to as “*Karamani and Acems*” — in his historical writings. Conversely, Kemalpaşazâde, a prominent *şeyhülislâm* of the same period, expressed in his own historical work a reaction against the dominance of slave-origin administrators.⁶⁶

Türkdoğan⁶⁷, offering a perspective parallel to that of Akdağ, argues that although the Ottoman central administration and bureaucracy were composed predominantly of devşirme-origin Ottomans, the Turks — as the founding element of the state — largely remained within the periphery as *reaya* (tax-paying subjects). Meanwhile, the non-Muslim communities accumulated wealth through various economic privileges, yet a Turkish bourgeoisie failed to emerge. The tense nature of this center–periphery relationship, along with the political and economic subordination to a capitalist, imperialist West,

⁶⁴ Şevket Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları* (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2007), p. 142.

⁶⁵ Akdağ, *Ibid*, p. 110-111.

⁶⁶ Akdağ, *Ibid*, p. 112.

⁶⁷ Orhan Türkdoğan, *Osmanlı'dan Günümüze Türk Toplum Yapısı* (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2008), p. 521-522.

became issues that the nation-building process sought to overcome. The subsequent sections of this study will analyze this historical transformation.

2. Emerging Capitalism and the New Forms of Socioeconomic Structure

As previous discussions have demonstrated, in traditional eras preceding modern society, the economy was fundamentally shaped by land ownership, which was critical. Land was significant not only for who held property rights but, more crucially, for serving as the primary unit of production. This was because, during those periods, production had not yet expanded beyond land-based domains into areas such as industry or commerce. However, a series of increasingly profound transformations began to take shape—particularly in agricultural production and traditional commerce. These transformations were driven by a set of interacting historical processes, including the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Exploration, and the Enlightenment, all of which contributed to the reconfiguration of traditional socioeconomic structures. The emergent economic formation that gradually extended across the globe came to be known as *capitalism*. In classical terms, capitalism refers to a socioeconomic order centered on the growth and expansion of capital, one of the fundamental factors of production. The primary economic functions—namely, the production, distribution, allocation, and consumption of goods—are all structured to prioritize capital above all else. For instance, what takes precedence over the worker's rightful wage, the public's access to introductory provisions, or the creation of a fair and equitable market is the establishment of an economic environment conducive to capital expansion.

In this context, Özyüksel argues that the foundation of the dissolution of feudalism in Western Europe lies in a historical-demographic phenomenon. According to this view, as nomadic invasions subsided, a period of peace and stability began to emerge across the European continent starting in the 10th century. This environment led to a significant increase in population; however, the land-based mode of production could not keep pace with this demographic pressure. As a result, waves of migration and expansion—both within and beyond the continent—began to unfold. Previously uncultivated lands were brought under cultivation, and the mounting population pressure generated renewed dynamism in commerce and urban life.⁶⁸ Although often interpreted primarily through a religious lens, the Crusades—despite ending with Jerusalem remaining in Muslim hands—nonetheless contributed to the revitalization of trade. The commercial functions and routes that developed during the Crusades marked the beginning of commerce's revival, which had previously collapsed under feudalism. In this sense, the merchant class in Europe was essentially reborn.⁶⁹ These transformations signified substantial changes in the structural codes of the feudal socioeconomic order. What took place was the disintegration of a relatively primitive and simplified social formation in favor of a more complex one, ushering in a process marked by the diversification and multiplication of social categories and classes

⁶⁸ Özyüksel, *Ibid.* p. 63-64.

⁶⁹ Özyüksel, *Ibid.* p. 65.

The transformation was from the primitive, self-sufficient, and land-based natural economy of the manorial system during the feudal period toward a monetized economy gradually shaped and strengthened by expanding trade.⁷⁰ The economy, once confined to the localized lives of lords and serfs within a specific domain, began to evolve into a more complex structure in response to the growing population's increasing demands and needs.

A crucial aspect of this emerging complexity was the opposition between the feudal lords who owned the manorial estates and the rising merchant class, which was gaining power through expanding trade. Since the lords also owned urban land, merchants faced a structural imbalance that they sought to counterbalance in their favor by establishing associations such as guilds or the Hanseatic League (*Hanse*).⁷¹ They also challenged the legal authority of the lords, who held judicial power over them. Of these classes, both of which concentrated wealth and power, the power of the traditional, land-bound lords was gradually eroding in the face of the new class representing trade and industry, which also triggered urbanization.

A similar transformation was also underway among the serfs. In situations where agricultural production proved insufficient under the pressure of a growing population—and where serfs lacked the capacity to meet the urban demand for goods—they began, when possible, to expand their cultivated lands into forests, meadows, and marshlands, either with or without the consent of their lords. As urbanization progressed, serfs gained greater agency and access to alternatives, gradually acquiring a power that eroded the authority of the feudal lords. In some cases, this even led to uprisings. In response, lords were often compelled to adopt strategies of concession and compromise.⁷² As this process reveals, the emerging developments not only signaled the rise of new social classes but also led to a redistribution of power within society, contributing to profound structural transformations in the socioeconomic order.

In his work that critically examines the roots of modernity through the lens of caste and feudalism, Baechler compares Europe, Japan, and India. He argues that the conventional dichotomy between modern and traditional societies—familiar in many classifications and comparisons—obscures the profound historical differences among the societies grouped under the label of *traditional*.⁷³ According to him, these divergent historical models demonstrate the fundamental inadequacy of such typologies. Baechler suggests that the divergence between Japan and Europe on the one hand, and India on the other—particularly after the nineteenth century—can be reasonably explained by three fundamental characteristics. First, a system of property existed in Japan and Europe that ensured income for the factors contributing to the production of wealth. Second, the market in these societies was organized to be as fluid and adaptable as possible. Third,

⁷⁰ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 67.

⁷¹ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 68.

⁷² Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 70.

⁷³ Jean Baechler, “The Origins of Modernity: Caste and Feudality (India, Europe and Japan)”, *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*, Ed. Jean Baechler, Joan A. Hall & Michael Mann (Cambridge: Basic Blackwell, 1989), p. 39.

there was an entrepreneurial class that continuously introduced innovations, motivated by the prospect of profit. In this regard, Baechler also challenges the Weberian thesis that attributes the foundations of modernity primarily to changes in religious attitudes, arguing that it may not provide as powerful a causal explanation as often assumed.⁷⁴ Instead, Baechler analyzes the frequently cited notion of a “decentered Europe,” emphasizing that it was the continuous reconfiguration of property relations—rooted in unstable power asymmetries—within a fluid market and along class lines that played a decisive role in the emergence of modernity.

By analyzing Europe’s historical conditions, Michael Mann argues that Europe’s success has its origins in an earlier period. He asserts that Europe, beginning around 1000 CE, attained a more efficient and productive agricultural capacity thanks to production techniques that, he emphasizes, developed more or less by chance.⁷⁵ Mann explains the uniqueness of Western civilization through a persistent state of restlessness that left no room for stagnation. Yet, he also acknowledges that such conditions do not inherently trigger social development—they could just as easily result in anomie or, in a Hobbesian sense, social disorder. The fact that these conditions in Europe did lead to development, Mann argues, can be explained through Max Weber’s interpretation of European restlessness as *rational unrest* and Emile Durkheim’s view of religion as a source of normative social order—both of which he sees as operative in the European context.⁷⁶ Ultimately, Mann concludes that what truly enabled Europe’s success was a historically unique and contingent synthesis⁷⁷, which he terms *headlessness*: an intense local autonomy of power coupled with a normative social order in which productive social actors entered into mutual relationships of trust.

The points emphasized by Baechler and Mann pertain primarily to the Western European social structure, which is often associated in the relevant literature with a dynamic societal organization and the development of class-based reflexes. The fact that the historical conditions in Western Europe culminated in modern civilization and capitalism has led to the medieval period being ascribed prestige. However, this retrospective valorization cannot negate the harsh realities of slavery and serfdom that characterized the era.

The urban social groups that came to dominate the expanding spheres of trade and industry perceived the feudal lords’ control over lands and trade routes as a significant obstacle to commerce. Within the fragmented power structure of the feudal period, monarchs—who had remained relatively weak—entered into alliances with the urban merchant class against the rural feudal lords. The emerging economic class sought to break free from the disorder of the feudal system, which hindered the development of trade and industry. Monarchs, in turn, saw an opportunity to liberate themselves from

⁷⁴ Baechler, *Ibid*, p. 60-61.

⁷⁵ Michael Mann, “European Development: Approaching a Historical Explanation”, *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*, Ed. Jean Beachler, Joan A. Hall & Michael Mann (Cambridge: Basic Blackwell, 1989), p. 8.

⁷⁶ Mann, *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁷⁷ Mann, *Ibid*, p. 16.

their dependency on vassals and lords by drawing financial strength from the taxes paid by these newly rising economic actors. The desire for a stronger centralized authority became a shared aspiration of peasants, artisans, merchants, and industrial entrepreneurs, prompting kings to act accordingly. This moment marked the beginning of the transformation from a feudal-aristocratic order to one dominated by the modern middle class. Within this context, monarchs began to adopt a strategic stance toward guilds, which had initially been established to protect urban trade and industry against the lords and had even facilitated their development. Over time, however, these same guilds came to impose constraints that once again hindered commercial and industrial growth.⁷⁸ This dynamic eventually paved the way for the consolidation of monarchies into nation-states, thus initiating the process of national unification.

The transformation toward the nation-state had far-reaching effects, influencing various domains—including the organizational form of religious authority. As monarchs grew stronger under the impulse of centralization, the Church remained the only institution to maintain centralized power. This ecclesiastical authority increasingly became a source of discontent across all social strata, and the broader dynamics of the period further deepened the rift between the monarchy and the Church. In place of a universal church, religious reformers such as Martin Luther sought to build a more nationally grounded ecclesiastical structure—one aligned with the interests of the emerging social classes.⁷⁹ In short, the path leading toward capitalist forms of social organization was gradually being paved.

While significant commercial, industrial, and political developments were taking place at the national level, equally important steps were also being taken at the supranational level to foster the expansion of capitalism. The commercial-industrial class, which had already faced the trade barriers imposed by guilds in urban centers, sought to counter the Venetians' privileged position in continental trade. This position led to inflated product prices. To turn this situation to their own advantage, they laid the groundwork for the Age of Exploration by utilizing innovations such as the compass and navigational maps to discover alternative maritime trade routes.⁸⁰

All of these structural transformations can be viewed as developments that gradually increased urbanization, eroded the power of feudal lords, and foreshadowed periods in which industrialists, merchants, and the working classes would flourish in cities. This process, which transformed the classical closed feudal economy through the logic of market and profit, was, in essence, capitalism itself. Notably, in the absence of a strong centralized state, the social classes—engaged in power struggles amidst a vacuum of authority—entered into intense relations of domination. This situation gave rise to a society that had become ruralized, primitive, and legally disordered, thereby weakening the civil legacy inherited from Rome. Yet, out of this matrix of conflicting social categories and despite these negative indicators, capitalism emerged—planting the seeds of the foundational codes of today's modern world and civilization. Before engaging in

⁷⁸ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 74-75.

⁷⁹ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 76.

⁸⁰ Özyüksel, *Ibid*, p. 77.

superficial cause-and-effect interpretations or speculative idealizations—especially common in comparisons with the Ottoman system—it is essential to examine how the capitalist development process manifested in the Ottoman context and what kinds of changes and problems it engendered there.

Kaymakçı argues that the transformation of the Ottoman socio-economic structure into the modern era must be understood within a historical and intellectual framework, emphasizing that the issue involves not only economic factors but also contexts that transcend the discipline of economics itself. In this regard, he states that the classical phase of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent historical experiences cannot be analyzed in isolation from structural transformations, cultural elements, and international influences.⁸¹ In light of this, it is essential to focus on Akdağ's⁸² important observation: that the Ottoman Empire—remarkably advanced in industries such as leatherworking, textile weaving, and dyeing until the mid-16th century—began to decline thereafter and could no longer compete with Europe. According to Akdağ, the most widely accepted explanation for this decline is the behavior of wealthy European buyers, who, by offering high prices for the raw materials needed by local industry, purchased and removed them from the domestic market. As a result, local producers struggled to afford these increasingly expensive materials—and at times even to find them. Furthermore, European merchants began processing the raw materials they had obtained from the Ottoman market and reselling them there as 'Freng cloth' (foreign fabric). The West—particularly Italy—thus became parasitic upon Ottoman artisanal life by extracting raw materials directly from its markets. At this point, the most fundamental question that comes to mind is why Ottoman industry was unable to compete—even in its own market—with a customer who traveled far to purchase raw materials; in other words, why the Ottomans did not pursue a mercantilist policy. According to Pamuk⁸³, the main reason for this lies in the fact that Ottoman Empire practices primarily reflected the priorities of the central bureaucracy. Merchants and producers, who played a leading role in the development of mercantilism in Europe, had little or no influence on Ottoman economic thought. Although consumer protection was part of the ideology of the Ottoman elite, the *narh* (official price regulation) policy, as Faroqhi⁸⁴ argues, primarily served to safeguard the interests of the ruling class. Faroqhi bases this claim on the observation that, while *narh* practices in the provinces were limited to essential goods, in Istanbul, official prices were set for all kinds of commodities. Consequently, the significant developments that took place in Western Christian countries as a result of the discovery of America and other new explorations—such as the excessive increase of gold and silver, the introduction of new financial methods, and the application of new economic rules that transformed social power into comprehensive productivity—had no stimulating effect

⁸¹ Özgün Burak Kaymakçı, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyete Tarihsel Düşünsel Bir Deneme: Türkiye Ekonomisi* (İstanbul: Ötüken Yayınları, 2015), p. 57.

⁸² Akdağ, *Ibid.*, p. 150-152.

⁸³ Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları*, p. 30.

⁸⁴ Suraiya Faroqhi, "Krizler ve Değişim: 1590-1699", *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Ekonomik ve Sosyal Tarihi Cilt 2*, Ed. Halil İnalcık-Donald Quataert, trans., Ayşe Berktaş (İstanbul: Eren Yayıncılık), p. 671.

whatsoever on Ottoman-Turkish craft and commercial life, which remained loyal to the guild traditions of the Middle Ages.

However, it may be considered that this answer is not sufficiently satisfactory in explaining why the capital accumulation necessary for a capitalist transformation did not occur in Ottoman society and, therefore, why a working class did not emerge. The question that still awaits an answer is why the aforementioned developments in the West had no stimulating effect in the Ottoman Empire.

Mehmet Genç⁸⁵ criticizes the approaches that view the absence of capital accumulation—which would make capitalist development possible—as the main problem in Ottoman society. He points out that while capital accumulation may be a starting point for economic growth, it is, from a sociological perspective, actually a *result*. Indeed, as can be observed in the restrictions, controls, and regulations within the Ottoman trade sector, the Empire was not merely “closed” to capitalism but also “opposed” to it; it was precisely this opposition that prevented capital accumulation. As explained in the previous section, the foundation of this attitude clearly lay in the principle of *provisionism* (*iaşecilik*), which prioritized the welfare of consumers rather than the profit of producers.

However, it should be noted that there are cases indicating that this classical model, as identified by Genç, gradually lost its functionality and deteriorated over time. Particularly notable is the emergence of developments resembling feudalism, despite the *timar* system's contributions to the aforementioned social order. Barkan refers to a feudal-like regime (*derebeylik*) that, although limited to a small population and lasting only for a period, persisted even during the height of the Ottoman Empire. He observes that in the 14th and 15th centuries, wealthy and influential individuals—even sultans and military commanders—established villages based on a form of serfdom by purchasing slaves from slave markets. These enslaved agricultural laborers, he notes, were distinguishable from the *reaya*. Although this category of serfdom was visible for a time during the Empire's classical age and soon declined, it reemerged as a tendency toward a *derebeylik* regime during the Empire's decline.⁸⁶

Similarly, Güran and Uzun state that tendencies toward feudalization have always persisted within the Ottoman Empire. They point out that, especially from the seventeenth century onwards, as the state's authority in the provinces weakened, land began to accumulate in the hands of certain groups. As a result, new forms of land use and agrarian relations emerged that diverged from the classical *timar* system.⁸⁷ It must be emphasized that the phenomenon of feudal transformation in the Ottoman Empire cannot be attributed solely to the disintegration of the *timar* system. As previously noted, a confluence of structural and contextual factors played a significant role in this process. Foremost among these were the inherent limitations of the Ottoman economic mentality,

⁸⁵ Genç, *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁸⁶ Barkan, *Türkiye'de Toprak Meselesi*, p. 721-724.

⁸⁷ Tevfik Güran and Ahmet Uzun, “Bosna-Hersek'te Toprak Rejimi: Eshâb-ı Alâka Ve Çiftçiler Arasındaki İlişkiler (1840-1875)”. *Belleten*, 70: 259 (2006 December), p. 867. (accessed: 21.07.2025).

which tended to perpetuate stagnation; the progressive weakening of the central state's authority in provincial areas; and the increasing external pressures stemming from the continuously expanding economies of Western Europe. In addition, the encroachment of the Janissaries into rural regions from their traditional urban strongholds, the exhaustion of the Empire's natural frontiers, which hindered the allocation of new *timars*, and the progressive fragmentation of existing holdings all contributed to the erosion of the classical land regime and the emergence of alternative land tenure arrangements resembling feudal structures.⁸⁸ However, given that the *timar* system constituted the central axis shaping Ottoman agricultural production, military organization, and fiscal structure, it is necessary to further examine how its dissolution disrupted classical institutions and rendered the Ottoman Empire vulnerable in the face of the rapidly capitalist-developing West.

The Ottoman *timar* system began to deteriorate due to several reasons, such as the inadequacy of the military training provided by the *sipahis* in the face of changes in warfare technology, and the fact that, following the debasement of coinage as a result of the rising inflation in both Europe and the Ottoman Empire, *sipahis* whose incomes had decreased began to abandon their *timars*. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, as the need arose in the center to form larger, permanent armies, the state began to abandon the *timar* system and adopt the *iltizam* system. The privilege of collecting taxes from the revenue source called *mukataa* began to be sold, through auction, to persons known as *mültezim*. In the seventeenth century, the duration of *iltizam* contracts was first extended from one to three years to three to five years, and later to longer periods, while a gradually increasing portion of the price determined at the auction began to be demanded in advance.⁸⁹ Thus, alongside deteriorating fiscal conditions, the central government's tendency to use the *iltizam* system as a means of internal borrowing grew stronger. Another method of internal borrowing employed by the state was *müsadere* (confiscation). As Genç⁹⁰ states, *müsadere* initially referred to the confiscation of the estates of members of the military class for the purpose of converting their lands into state property—a practice which the Ottoman state had not previously preferred. However, after the 1770s, its scope was expanded to include the confiscation of the estates of wealthy private individuals, and it was applied more intensively. Pamuk⁹¹ notes that the most important reason that drove the state to this practice was that, during the war of 1787–1792, the Ottoman Empire for the first time, sought to obtain external loans, but when the countries approached—namely the Netherlands, France, and Spain—refused to provide such loans, the state was forced to resort to internal borrowing. Regardless of the reason, this practice encouraged wealthy individuals to establish foundations (*vakıf*) and dedicate their properties to them to protect their possessions from confiscation; therefore, it is possible to state that this practice did not hurt the transformation of the social structure, and even that it had positive consequences in

⁸⁸ Güran and Uzun, *Ibid*, p. 868.

⁸⁹ Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları*, p. 136-137.

⁹⁰ Genç, *Ibid*, p.220.

⁹¹ Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları*, p. 139.

terms of contributing to the proliferation of the *vakıf* system. However, the *iltizam* system had rather extensive disruptive effects on the social order. The expansion of the *iltizam* system and the extension of contract durations blurred ownership and entitlement claims and increased uncertainty about obligations toward the central state. It became progressively more difficult for the state to keep track of who held what rights over how much land. As it became harder for administrators to establish direct relations with the producing class, peasants too frequently found themselves facing not the *mültezims* themselves but subcontractors acting on their behalf. The primary aim of the *mültezims* was to maximize their revenues as quickly as possible to repay their debts to the state and secure the renewal of their contracts; to this end, they often resorted to various forms of pressure on the peasants.⁹² Nevertheless, by the end of the seventeenth century, the state took a further step in the *iltizam* system and introduced the *malikâne* regime. This system, which exerted a profound influence on the economy throughout the eighteenth century, entailed selling *iltizams* to *mültezims* as lifelong *malikâne*. The *mültezim*, having purchased this source of revenue, was obliged to pay a fixed annual tax to the treasury, predetermined and guaranteed by the state not to be increased from year to year. Since the portion remaining after the fixed tax paid to the treasury constituted the *mültezim*'s profit, the system encouraged *mültezims* to enhance their productive capacities. The *mültezim* purchased the tax source by paying an advance amount called *muaccele*, which corresponded to the capitalization of the potential future profits he might obtain. The amount of this advance payment, which, for the state, signified regular income, was determined at auction. In this way, the state expected, on the one hand, to increase tax revenues and, on the other hand, to obtain additional income from the rise in capitalization (*muaccele*) to be set for the resale of *malikânes* upon the death of their holders. Almost all types of taxes were incorporated into this system. Although the *malikâne* system initially had positive effects on the economy, its negative consequences soon emerged.⁹³ When *malikâne* holders died, the contracts were not returned to state control; instead, the state's tax revenues declined. To meet the advance payments required at the auctions, the *malikâne* holders were obliged to strengthen their financial backing, which led to the growing involvement of Istanbul's *sarrafs*—most of whom were non-Muslims—in the tax-collection process by providing financial support to the *mültezims*.⁹⁴ More importantly, the *malikâne* system did not give rise to a capitalist entrepreneurial class within Ottoman society; the *malikâne* holders remained wealthy rentier bureaucrats. Because the *malikâne* holders did not themselves collect the taxes but instead transferred this task to second- and even third-tier *mültezims*, the system gradually became a mechanism that expanded income transfers to the increasingly numerous rentier groups.⁹⁵ Indeed, Pamuk⁹⁶, relying on Murat Çizakça's calculations, notes that during this period, only one-fourth of the gross tax revenues and one-third of the net tax revenues entered the state treasury, while the remaining large portion was distributed

⁹² Reşat Kasaba, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve Dünya Ekonomisi* (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları), p. 19.

⁹³ Genç, *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁹⁴ Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları*, p. 137-138.

⁹⁵ Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları*, p. 137-138.

⁹⁶ Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları*, p. 142.

among the *malikâne* holders, *sarrafs*, and local powerholders who collected taxes at their sources.

Among these local powerholders, the foremost were the *ayans*. Until the sixteenth century, *ayan* referred to the “notables” of a district. Still, their strengthening occurred in the second half of the sixteenth century, depending on the economic conditions of the time. Taking advantage of circumstances such as the decline in gold and silver in the country, the rise in financial distress, and the increasing tax burden on the peasantry—who were already suffering from monetary scarcity in Anatolia—many moneylenders lent money to peasants. When they could not recover their loans, they seized their goods and lands. The great moneylenders, consisting of persons such as *çavuş*, *zeamet* and *timar* holders, who emerged among the *reaya* and were called “provincial *ayan*,” together with their sons⁹⁷, as well as dismissed judges (*kadı*), district governors (*sancakbeyi*), muftis and their sons, and janissaries, came to constitute this class during the eighteenth century.⁹⁸

The transformation of the *ayans* into a powerful group that influenced the Ottoman economic and social order occurred only after their inclusion in the *iltizam* system. As *mültezims*, the *ayans* gained the opportunity to rapidly increase their wealth. As Özkaya’s⁹⁹ detailed explanations show, while the possibilities of *beylerbeyis*, *sancakbeyis*, and other officials to expand their wealth and influence were limited to the duration of their terms of office, the *ayans* who took over *mukataas* as *malikânes* and obtained the lifelong privilege of collecting taxes from these territories acquired an uncontrolled opportunity to accumulate wealth. In the mid-sixteenth century, *mültezims*—mainly composed of *kapıkulu* (imperial household soldiers)—operated primarily in cities; however, after the second half of the seventeenth century, and especially throughout the eighteenth century, most *mültezims* were *ayans*. This development paved the way for them to establish local dynasties in Anatolia. Claiming that their *malikânes* were autonomous, the *ayans* protected themselves from the interference of *kadis* and *valis*. They often bequeathed to their sons the fortunes they had rapidly accumulated through excessive and unlawful taxation. Kasaba¹⁰⁰ argues that the *ayans* were not the product of classical Ottoman society, but instead of the Ottoman culture that emerged during its integration with the capitalist world-economy. Yet the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the capitalist world was neither long-term nor stable; instead, the Ottoman Empire functioned as a peripheral region (*uç bölgesi*) of the core countries. Within this framework, the empowerment of the *ayans* became possible through the weakening of the power of the *Bâb-ı Âli* (the Sublime Porte). The *ayans* maintained strong ties with two groups. The first was the financial relationship they built with non-Muslim *sarrafs* to participate in *mültezimlik* arrangements; the second was the relationship they maintained with the central state to preserve their positions. Although the *ayans* had a strong

⁹⁷ Yücel Özkaya, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Âyânlık*, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1994), p. 9.

⁹⁸ Özkaya, *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁹⁹ Özkaya, *Ibid*, p. 108-109.

¹⁰⁰ Kasaba, *Ibid*, p. 89-90.

presence in the countryside, the real source of their power derived not from their relationship with land, but from their connection with state authorities. As Özkaya¹⁰¹ notes, *mütesellims*—who acted as deputies of *sancakbeyis* in the districts—had to maintain good relations with the *ayans*, since the *ayans* were influential over *kadis* and over external provincial and district governors, and were often even superior to them. By 1806, the *ayans* had become so powerful that they were able to obtain a promise from Grand Vizier Hilmi Pasha for the dismissal of Abdurrahman Pasha, the governor of Edirne. Indeed, with the signing of the *Sened-i İttifak* in 1807, they succeeded in limiting the authority of the central government and, to that extent, became partners in power.

Most Ottoman bureaucrats, who sought to revive classical power relations, generally had no intention of adapting to the capitalist transformation. Even during the height of Eastern trade, merchants remained clustered in specific commercial hubs, and their significance declined further as this trade diminished. Their commercial activity—which could have been seen as an early sign of capitalism—gradually faded.¹⁰² Terms such as *tâcir* and *bâzergân* became mere clichés, as commerce was downgraded to the level of the marketplace artisan. This “downgrading” should be understood not only as a numerical decline but also as a descent within the hierarchy of social value, reflecting a shift toward lower-prestige occupations. In fact, the types of commercial activities that Muslim Ottomans were reluctant to engage in came to be dominated by non-Muslims. By the 1840s, the class of financial capitalists known as the Galata Bankers in Ottoman society had come to include not only Greeks and Armenians but also Jews and Levantines—European-origin families who had settled in the Eastern Mediterranean. Prominent families such as the Baltazzi, Camondo, Koronio, Eugenides, Mavrokordato, Mısrırlıoğlu, Ralli, and Zarifi had developed extensive capacity and skills in securing short-term loans for the Ottoman state from European sources.¹⁰³ As the Ottoman Empire increasingly turned to external short-term borrowing, it also sought to expand its control over internal tax revenues and to rely more heavily on domestic lending. When these measures failed to resolve fiscal problems, the state resorted to currency debasement (*tağşiş*) to generate additional income. The reign of Mahmud II (1808–1839) is especially notable for witnessing the most rapid episodes of debasement and the highest inflation in Ottoman history.

It is particularly striking that, despite the significant role played by non-Muslim capitalists in overcoming the challenges caused by the Ottoman Empire’s troubled relationship with capital, the Ottoman ruling elite’s dismissive attitude toward economic activities that could foster capital accumulation largely remained unchanged. A notable anecdote, as recounted by Kazgan¹⁰⁴, illustrates this mindset. With the advent of the Tanzimat era, the Ottoman government granted freedom of economic activity—within

¹⁰¹ Özkaya, *Ibid*, p.19.

¹⁰² Ülgener, *Ibid*, p. 33.

¹⁰³ Pamuk, *Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Kurumları*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁴ Haydar Kazgan, “Gedikler”, *Prof. Dr. Haydar Kazgan’a Armağan: Yakın Tarihimizin İktisadi Panoraması*, Ed. Ertuğrul Tokdemir, Öner Günçavdı, Saime Suna Kayam, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2011), p. 81-82.

the limitations accepted by European states—to all Ottoman subjects regardless of religion, language, race, or other distinctions, as well as to foreign nationals. As a result, highly developed European industries began flooding the Ottoman Empire with an overwhelming abundance of goods at prices local producers could not compete with. However, this economic invasion met with an unexpected resistance: the *gediks* (holders of monopoly rights in specific trades). Unable to withstand competition, these *gediks* objected to the importation of goods into their own licensed production areas. They even attempted to petition Sultan Mahmud II to issue a decree banning the sale of foreign goods in the capital markets. This initiative provoked strong reactions from foreign ambassadors. One anecdote—said to have taken place between the French ambassador and Sultan Mahmud II—captures the tension of the moment. According to the story, the ambassador, complaining about the situation, was granted an audience with the Sultan. When the ambassador insisted that foreign merchants be allowed to sell their goods freely, the Sultan was initially surprised but then calmly responded that peace would be ensured and that the merchants could set up tents on Galata Hill to sell their goods. After the ambassador left, the Sultan turned to his vizier. He reportedly said: “How can a nobleman from a distinguished family, so well-dressed and well-educated, stoop to such vulgar business and act as a protector of peddlers?” Yet, as Kazgan emphasizes, the issue the ambassador was so concerned with—though scornfully referred to by the Sultan as “vulgar business”—was, in fact, a matter that affected the fate of thousands of *gedik* families.

In conclusion, the Ottoman Empire, which consciously chose not to become capitalist and built its entire socio-economic system around this choice, may not have become an outright colony under capitalism. Still, it could not avoid becoming one of its early victims. The process that culminated in the establishment of the *Düyun-u Umumiye* (Public Debt Administration) imparted a crucial lesson to the founding cadres of the Turkish Republic—namely, that political or military victories, however substantial, would be insufficient unless accompanied by corresponding economic achievements. As encapsulated in their oft-repeated maxim: “No matter how great political or military victories may be, if they are not crowned with economic triumphs, those victories will not endure and will soon fade.”¹⁰⁵ During the industrialization period in which Western Europe began to transcend feudalism and transition to the modern capitalist stage, the Ottoman Empire—contrary to its classical period—began to exhibit features resembling a serfdom-based structure. As a result, the Republican regime was compelled to base itself upon a set of deep-rooted social structural problems, particularly those concerning landless peasants, which required significant efforts to resolve through land redistribution.

For this reason, the subsequent part of the article is guided by the perspectives of the Dependency School, which places at its analytical core the sociological proposition that economic dependencies inevitably give rise to political dependencies.

¹⁰⁵ Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri (Bugünkü Dille), (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayınları, 2006), p. 474.

3. The Dilemmas of the Modern World: The Globe, Türkiye, and the Future

In light of the discussions thus far, it can be argued that modernity, with its far-reaching transformations across all institutions, has not only reshaped much of the world but also triggered profound, and in some ways incomplete or failed, transformations in the Ottoman/Turkish context. As previously noted, although the Ottoman Empire consciously implemented the *tımar* system as a political and social program throughout the traditional era, it ultimately became directly exposed to the destructive forces of rapidly advancing capitalism in neighboring regions. So much so that even the First World War can be interpreted, in part, as the outcome of the Western industrial powers' insatiable appetite for raw materials, labor, markets, and other resources necessary to sustain the machinery of capitalist production, in this respect, the Ottoman Empire—possessing a vast and resource-rich geography—became a principal target of the colonial ambitions of modern industrial states. This reality constituted a fundamental reason why the Ottoman order could not carry its traditional existence into the modern age. Indeed, before it could even witness the intensifying global dynamics that would culminate in the Second World War, the Ottoman Empire was forced to exit the historical stage in the wake of the First World War—a conflict fueled by the relentless advance of unrestrained capitalism.

When assessed within this broader framework, it becomes clear why the Republican project holds such critical importance in shaping the destiny of the Turkish nation. Emerging from the legacy of the Ottoman experience—which had fallen behind amid the fierce competition generated by modernity's profound structural transformations—the Republic was envisioned as a rapid and effective response to this backwardness and sought to implement a comprehensive program of reform. Given its ambitious goals, the Republic's design and realization can rightfully be considered a remarkable achievement. To understand just how extraordinary this success was, one needs only look to the numerous examples across the colonized non-Western world where the image of the Republic and of Atatürk has been held in high regard. At this point, before turning to the destructive impact of modern capitalism on the global order and balance, it is worthwhile to broadly examine the Turkish Republic's development efforts, especially as they followed the Ottoman Empire's attempt to establish a more just land system compared to feudal Europe—a project which, in the end, showed increasing tendencies toward feudal disorder.

Kili argues that one of the most defining issues of the 20th century was the question of independence. Following the spread of the idea of nationalism by the French Revolution, the national independence struggle waged by the Anatolian Turks against capitalist states—and the subsequent Atatürk revolutions—added a distinct dimension to this global movement of emancipation.¹⁰⁶ This inspiring and unique story of liberation represented not only a spirit of resistance for non-Western societies but also a model of

¹⁰⁶ Suna Kili, *Bir Çağdaşlaşma Modeli Atatürk Devrimi*, 10th ed., (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2006), p. 3.

national planning and development aimed at escaping the grip of underdevelopment and exploitation. As is well known, these revolutions were widely regarded as a transformative movement that resonated across many geographies devastated by colonialism.

While addressing another dimension of this distinctiveness, Lewis emphasizes that what set the Turkish revolution apart from other Eastern revolutions was the fact that the Turks themselves assumed full responsibility for the necessary political restructuring. In contrast to other revolutionary movements in the East—many of which were interrupted, diverted, or reversed—the Turkish revolution distinguished itself through its tendency to deepen and expand.¹⁰⁷ With the establishment of the Republic, the Turks of Anatolia constructed an exceptional position within their own historical category, and in the dichotomous geopolitical landscape of the 20th century—dominated by relations between colonizers and the colonized—they emerged as a new category and subject in their own right.

Chang, who portrays Atatürk as a source of intellectual inspiration, believes that General Park—the architect of today’s developed South Korea—also regarded Atatürk as a role model, much like himself.¹⁰⁸ Drawing on Friedrich List’s influence, Chang employs the metaphor of “kicking away the ladder”^{*} to argue that Western countries have deliberately and manipulatively misrepresented their own paths to development to non-Western societies.¹⁰⁹ He asserts that these countries impose misleading development prescriptions that do not reflect the historical realities of their own advancement. When one examines Chang’s arguments concerning Atatürk and the West, it becomes evident that Atatürk stands out as a unique statesman precisely because he did not implement the West’s manipulative prescriptions. Instead, he applied the very strategies of genuine development that the West had reserved for itself. This seemingly simple but deeply significant truth must be strongly recognized and emphasized.

Kayra asserts that not only the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye but also the creation of a republican economy constitute a miracle. As he points out, the Republic was founded with a population of 12 million impoverished citizens, marked by widespread illiteracy and low cultural levels, on a land devastated by war, and within a country that had lost its intellectual capital and agricultural labor force on the battlefronts. The difficulties were compounded by a rudimentary agricultural system reliant on primitive

¹⁰⁷ Bernard Lewis, *Modern Türkiye'nin Doğuşu*, trans., Metin Kıratlı, 8th Ed. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 2000), p. 476.

¹⁰⁸ Ha-Joon Chang, *Kalkınma Reçetelerinin Gerçek Yüzü*, 7th Ed., trans., Tuba Akıncılar Onmuş, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016), p. 7-9.

* The "Kicking Away the Ladder" metaphor, inspired by Friedrich List, is employed by the Korean scholar Ha-Joon Chang. The metaphor refers to a person who ascends to a high place using a ladder and then kicks it away to prevent others from following. According to this metaphor, the developed Western countries, having achieved their own economic advancement, deliberately mislead non-Western societies aspiring to develop, thereby obstructing their progress. In doing so, they effectively 'kick away the ladder' and attempt to undermine the development efforts of these nations. For a detailed discussion, see: Yıldırım, İlteriş, “‘Merdiven Tekmeleme’ Metaforu Bağlamında Türkiye’de Kalkınma Tartışmalarına İlişkin Bir Değerlendirme”, *Sosyolojik Düşün*, 9:2 (2024 July), 138-165. <https://doi.org/10.37991/sosdus.1507350>

¹⁰⁹ Chang, *Ibid*, p. 211.

tools such as ox-carts and wooden plows, a feeble industrial base consisting of only a few outdated factories, commerce dominated mainly by minorities and foreigners, and alarming statistics such as one doctor per 100,000 people and one engineer per 200,000. Further challenges included alienated elites unfamiliar with Anatolia and a capital city, Ankara, that resembled a medieval village.¹¹⁰ Describing the period from 1923 to 1939 as the “golden years” of the Republic, Kayra highlights key economic initiatives as evidence of a transformative developmental agenda. These include the founding of İş Bankası—envisioned at the İzmir Economic Congress—as a national and modern financial institution in response to the dominance of foreign banks; the acquisition of cabotage rights, which allowed the maritime sector to become a national enterprise; the creation of the Tayyare Piyangosu (precursor to the National Lottery) to fund the Turkish Aeronautical Association in line with the vision captured in the motto “The future is in the skies!”; the implementation of protective customs tariffs to safeguard domestic industry and the national treasury; the expansion of the railway network; the nationalization of natural resources previously controlled by foreign interests; the establishment of Sümerbank; the founding of Maden Tetkik Arama Enstitüsü (General Directorate of Mineral Research and Exploration) and Etibank as pioneering institutions in mining; the launch of the Elektrik İşleri Etüd İdaresi (Electricity Studies Administration) to address electricity shortages following foreign disinterest; and the articulation of Türkiye’s first and second Five-Year Industrial Plans as a means to crystallize the nation’s development strategy.¹¹¹ These achievements not only indicate that the country’s administration had set itself on the right course despite exceptionally difficult conditions at home and abroad, but also carry deep symbolic value.

Alongside the prestigious economic initiatives of the Republic’s founding years, it is also necessary to examine its approach to land ownership. During the classical period of the Ottoman Empire, a land regime was in place that prioritized the welfare of the population. However, this structure gradually lost its functionality during the periods of dissolution and decline. Over time, it evolved into a system of land ownership marked by feudal characteristics, most notably the rise of rural landlords (ağas). Kili notes that during the Empire’s periods of intense activity, the land regime functioned without disruption, serving as a cornerstone of the economy. Still, in later years, it became one of the internal factors contributing to the Empire’s collapse.¹¹² It is well known that, in the early years of the Republic, Atatürk and the entire cadre of republican leadership made substantial efforts to resolve this deeply rooted problem.

Lewis states that, much like Mahmud II and the statesmen of the Tanzimat period, Atatürk demonstrated unwavering determination to abolish the privileges and autonomy of the feudal landlord class, and he consistently pursued policies in this direction. By the time of his leadership, these semi-feudal structures were concentrated mainly in the

¹¹⁰ Cahit Kayra, “Cumhuriyet Ekonomisinin Öyküsü Devletçilik Altın Yıllar Bozkırdaki Mucize”, *Cumhuriyetin Ekonomi Politığı Devletçilik-Halkçılık-Planlama-Kalkınma*, ed. Şenol Çarık, 2nd Ed. (İstanbul: Tarihi Kitabevi, 2020), p. 119-120.

¹¹¹ Kayra, *Ibid*, p. 120-129.

¹¹² Suna Kili, *Türk Devrim Tarihi*, 10th ed., (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2006), p. 157-160.

country's eastern regions. Influenced in part by uprisings in those areas, Atatürk reinforced his commitment to the breakup of large estates. The issue of land reform resurfaced during the İnönü era with the enactment of the Land Distribution Law (*Çiftçiyi Topraklandırma Kanunu*). However, this reform initiative encountered significant resistance from various social groups. These included large landowners (ağas), peasants allied with them, the newly emerging rural merchant class, and members of the traditional religious establishment. Many of these groups would later constitute the core support base of the Democrat Party.¹¹³ The so-called “Fours” (*Dörtler*)—Celal Bayar, Adnan Menderes, Refik Koraltan, and Mehmet Fuat Köprülü—prepared a motion opposing the legislation, taking a stance in favor of the landlord system. Despite this, the reform was passed into law on June 11, 1945. Attempts to implement similar legislation had been made even before the Republican era, but these were limited in scope, impact, and implementation. The 1945 Law specifically targeted semi-feudal estates exceeding 500 decares in size—particularly public lands and extensive private holdings—to allocate land to approximately five million landless individuals. According to Lewis, this revolutionary initiative, which would have transformed Türkiye into an agrarian country composed of independent smallholders if fully implemented, was severely criticized: the political right branded it as communist. In contrast, the political left denounced it as fascist or Nazi. Although the law was intended to free peasants from feudal bondage and represented a socially beneficial reform, by 1950, the ceiling for the expropriation of large estates was raised from 500 to 5,000 decares, effectively rendering the law inoperative.¹¹⁴ Yet it is a well-established fact that the landlord system, which still persists in some regions of Türkiye, is a vestige of medieval social relations—one that continues to fuel social inequality, obstruct democratic functioning, and threaten national unity.

In his 1960 article titled “*Land Reforms and the Issue of Internal Colonization*,” Barkan attributes the fragility of Türkiye's agricultural economy at the time to a range of technical, natural, and economic challenges. These include inadequate production and transportation infrastructure, limited access to knowledge, unfavorable climate conditions, and land scarcity. In addition to these factors, he also draws attention to the enduring presence of feudal-era land relations embedded in prevailing patterns of land ownership and usage.¹¹⁵ Barkan argued that, during that period, the most effective form of land reform was to open new settlement and colonization areas in regions that had remained abandoned until then for historical, sanitary, technical, and economic reasons. He emphasized the necessity of institutional organizations to serve this purpose and stated that these organizations should embody the spirit and character of the Village Institutes.¹¹⁶ Unfortunately, it is not possible to claim that the national task Barkan pointed to in the 1960s has been fulfilled. In fact, this task remains relevant in contemporary Türkiye.

¹¹³ Lewis, *Ibid*, p. 315.

¹¹⁴ Lewis, *Ibid*, p. 467.

¹¹⁵ Ömer Lütfi Barkan, *Kolonizatör Türk Dervişleri*, 2nd ed., prep. Yahya Kemal Taştan (İstanbul: Ötüken Yayınları, 2021), p. 493.

¹¹⁶ Barkan, *Kolonizatör Türk Dervişleri*, p. 495-497.

In the post–Second World War period, particularly during the 1950s, Türkiye entered a phase characterized by complex political and diplomatic processes, shaped mainly by the United States through the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. While a process of reconstruction was successfully unfolding under U.S. supervision in Western Europe, there has been considerable debate over the problematic consequences of this same process for Türkiye. In addition, this period in Türkiye was characterized by an unplanned, uncontrolled wave of internal migration and its far-reaching consequences. Issues such as the informal economy, deviation from planned development goals, and the rise of *gecekondulaşma* (the spread of unregulated urban settlements) are among the major criticisms of this era. In the decades that followed, Türkiye’s national agenda came to be shaped by a series of deeply entrenched structural challenges. Despite notable achievements in development, many of these problems remained unresolved. Among them were chronic inflation, the inability to produce high-quality industrial goods with domestic capital, and persistent difficulties in increasing and equitably distributing national income. Additional issues included regional disparities, inefficiencies in the education system, terrorism, natural disasters such as earthquakes, and traffic congestion. Collectively, these issues emerged as urgent national imperatives, requiring long-term, strategic solutions. As was the case during the Republic’s formative years, the role of the state in Türkiye remains crucial in addressing these structural challenges. Barkan¹¹⁷ also emphasized this point, arguing that the state should not adopt an indifferent liberal stance toward issues related to industrialization and land ownership.

While these experiences were unfolding in Türkiye, the world—now having completed the 20th century and entered the first quarter of the 21st—has transformed into a planet marked by heightened tensions. Although the modern age has brought significant achievements and advancements for humanity, it has also generated profound contradictions and conflicts. In a world increasingly plagued by inequality, capitalism has left behind a controversial legacy, reigniting debates over the so-called world system and the “new world order.” Concepts such as globalization and modernization have become key terms in academic and intellectual discourse, reflecting the intensifying turmoil of the contemporary world. Ecological crises alone have come to symbolize the planet’s heightened state of stress. At the human and societal levels, the increasing prevalence of wars, political unrest, global polarization, growing anxieties over potential new world wars, international migration, the vast informal and transnational sector of human and migrant smuggling, consumerism, the global tendency toward devaluation, and the emergence of a desensitized human profile—all represent focal points of intensifying global debate and concern.

All of these challenges are closely related to the global order shaped by capitalist forces driven by intense competition and conflict, which have had profoundly adverse effects on international peace and stability. Any individual—and particularly intellectuals—who perceives the current state of affairs clearly is aware of the chaos produced by power centers acting under a destructive capitalist motive in the contemporary age.

¹¹⁷ Barkan, *Kolonizatör Türk Dervişleri*, p. 493.

Falk argues that, despite the formal end of colonialism and racism*—and even the conclusion of the Cold War—the current form of global political organization has failed to inspire hope or restraint. He emphasizes the indifference of the United States, which, despite its dominant position and the opportunities it offers on the world stage, remains primarily unresponsive to the world’s suffering, misery, and problems.¹¹⁸ It is evident that the United States, which has acted as the world’s leading power since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has not used that power to establish a more peaceful global order.

Wallerstein argues that there is no clear evidence that today’s world is freer, egalitarian, or fraternal than it was a thousand years ago—though he is careful to clarify that this observation is not meant to romanticize pre-capitalist societies. In his view, while the conditions of many industrial workers may have improved, the situation has deteriorated for a broader global category of laborers—namely, those based in rural areas and urban slums—who represent a larger proportion of the world population. Wallerstein suggests that many people today work more for less prosperity; although early-life mortality rates may have declined, he questions whether life expectancy has meaningfully increased for the majority of the world’s population in the later stages of life. He contends that the graph of exploitation in today’s world is on a steep upward trajectory.¹¹⁹ Thus, regardless of any normative claims or ideological suggestions, the picture that emerges does not portray the world as a well-ordered place—and perhaps not unjustifiably so.

Chomsky, referencing Winston Churchill’s statement that the governance of the world should be entrusted to “satiated nations”—those who, supposedly, have no further ambitions—challenges the claim by arguing that the wealthy nations Churchill referred to were by no means devoid of ambition or greed.¹²⁰ Chomsky further asserts that within the global North–South axis—defined by levels of development—the so-called Third World, a term often used to categorize the underdeveloped South, has functioned primarily to serve the economic interests of the affluent North by offering investment opportunities, cheap labor, raw materials, and consumer markets. The Third World, often “rewarded” by being turned into tourism hubs or outlets for laundering funds generated from the illicit trade of narcotics, also contributes to the North’s prosperity by tolerating environmental pollution exports.¹²¹ On one side stand the wealthy, industrialized nations—regardless of whether they are labeled as the West or the North—who sustain their global dominance through unjust and asymmetrical influences on the rest of the world. On the other side are the underdeveloped, impoverished countries of the South, East, or

* Rather than speaking of the end of colonialism and racism altogether, it would be more accurate to state that what has ended is the explicit and concrete forms of these phenomena in the Western geography to which they have been historically attributed.

¹¹⁸ Richard A. Falk, *Dünya Düzeni Nereye? Amerikan Emperyal Jeopolitikası*, trans., Neşenur Domaniç, Nusret Arhan, (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2005), p. 17.

¹¹⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Tarihsel Kapitalizm, 5th Ed.*, trans., Necmiye Alpay, (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2009), p. 85-86.

¹²⁰ Noam Chomsky, *Dünya Düzeni: Eskisi Yenisi*, trans., Ali Çakıroğlu, Tuncay Birkan, 2nd Ed., (İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2003), p. 14-15.

¹²¹ Chomsky, *Ibid*, p. 116.

so-called non-Western world, which, far from escaping their structural contradictions, often deepen their categorical misery by attempting to profit from the very disorder that oppresses them. It is beyond dispute that this global configuration demands urgent re-organization.

While Falk questions whether it is still possible to look to the future with hope, he argues that the current global order is in decline due to the United States' imperial strategy. Yet, paradoxically, he suggests that this very decline contains a dialectical potential—a political impulse to build a better world. In a similarly hopeful yet morally charged approach, Lipson asserts that humanity has reached a particularly delicate and critical stage in its development.¹²² According to Lipson, contemporary civilization simultaneously harbors the potential to either propel itself forward or lead to its own destruction. At this juncture, moral responsibility—such as the expected contributions of scientific research—entails the duty to seek and implement measures that would enhance human well-being and happiness.¹²³ There is no doubt that Lipson, who believes that civilization is facing a moral crisis, perceives the malign possibilities embedded in this historical moment as significant threats and, accordingly, calls for a renewed moral order.

As can be understood from all these considerations, it is clear that there is a crisis of and a seek for order in today's world. In an interview, when asked whether the Turks have become entirely capitalist today and whether they are capable of proposing something new, Mehmet Genç¹²⁴ stated that the Turkish people possess an extraordinary vitality and a high potential for achieving universal success. He argued that capitalism could be transformed and reconciled with values specific to Turkish society—such as egalitarian and just Islamic principles—and, in this way, freed from its savage nature and humanized, thereby offering renewed hope for the future.

¹²² Falk, *Ibid*, p. 22.

¹²³ Leslie Lipson, *Uygarlığın Ahlaki Bunalımları*, trans., J. Çam Yeşiltaş (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları. 2000), p. 23.

¹²⁴ Mehmet Genç, *Mehmet Genç İle Söyleşi*, Last Update: 27 April 2025. <https://www.sabahulkesi.com/2015/08/06/mehmet-gen%C3%A7-ile-s%C3%B6yle%C5%9Fi/>

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, which has transitioned from a traditional order to a capitalist economic system, cultural and geographical dynamics have grown increasingly complex. What creates the complexity here is the fact that the Western experience—where the feudal structure transformed and evolved into capitalist development—and the Ottoman experience—which, even if in the service of maintaining a strong central authority, placed human values at the center of its social system—represent two very different historical trajectories. Western feudalism emerged as a system built upon inequalities. However, this process continued as these very inequalities evolved into new forms of exploitation, ultimately giving rise to capitalism—precisely the system Marx and his followers criticized.

When the Ottoman experience is examined, in contrast to the highly unequal feudal order, we encounter a socio-economic structure centered on a strong central state and the consumer public—or rather, the *reaya*—deliberately placed at the core of the system. Naturally, the main factor shaping this preference of the central authority was the desire to prevent the emergence of potential power centers that could grow and become threats to state authority. Yet, although this structure was initially stable in itself, it eventually succumbed to the West because it could neither adapt to capitalist developments nor desire to do so. Ultimately, as observed in the period of disintegration and decline in Ottoman society, the Empire's integration into the capitalist world occurred not as a rule-making actor, but as a participant shaped by the dynamics of others.

Therefore, at this point, to regard the welfare states that the West achieved, particularly after the Second World War, as the outcome of the feudal exploitation and chaos it experienced throughout the Middle Ages would amount to an attempt to affirm the problematic conditions of the medieval period. Such a perspective would also mean disregarding the role of numerous human achievements and labor efforts that emerged in the West. Similarly, to view the characteristics of the Ottoman social structure, which was based on a land system, as the sole reason for its failure to integrate into the capitalist modern world would overlook other problems that emerged over the course of the process. Indeed, after the establishment of its classical order, the Ottoman Empire experienced certain feudal transformations or disintegrations; however, it is impossible to argue that these tendencies toward feudalization evolved into capitalism or generated effects that could carry the Empire forward. A more reasonable approach would seek the causes of Ottoman stagnation in science, education, art, agriculture, trade, and industry, not solely in the land system, but also in a variety of other factors.

Today, it is of great importance to revise and return to the spirit of the developmental economic policies formulated during the founding period of the Republic of Türkiye—policies whose effectiveness can now be more clearly appreciated in retrospect, despite the deviations caused by global conditions and the vulnerabilities of Turkish politics. Indeed, had these development-oriented strategies been consistently adhered to, it might not have been necessary today to frame the Ottoman experience as a stagnant social formation based on its land system. Steps to be taken and measures to be implemented to become a development-oriented country that radiates peace to the world will

not only ensure the welfare of Turkish society but also serve as a renewed model for other nations, particularly those suffering under the strain of unchecked capitalist ambition. In doing so, Türkiye could once again inspire hope in societies currently enduring the suffocating consequences of global inequality.

Declaration

We declare that this study is original; that we have acted by the principles and rules of scientific ethics at all stages of the study, including preparation, data collection, analysis, and presentation of information; that we have cited sources for all data and information not obtained within the scope of this study and included these sources in the bibliography; that we have not made any changes in the data used, and that we comply with ethical duties and responsibilities by accepting all the terms and conditions of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). I hereby declare that if a situation contrary to my statement regarding the study is detected, we agree to all moral and legal consequences that may arise.

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