

## **Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Original Insights on Economy**

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### **Introduction**

The views of Said Nursi concerning the issue of economic activity that are found mostly in *The Nineteenth Flash* (also known as “*The Treatise On Economy*”) have again been brought to light by placing them within the broader context of the 5000 page treatise of the *Risale-i Nur*. His explanations in the “*Treatise of Frugality*” have been analyzed with respect to various parts of the *Risale-i Nur* as a whole and through doing this, new issues and matters have been uncovered. Some of his economic explanations are considerably different from that of modern capitalist economics.

### **1. Concept of Neediness**

Economics is typically defined as the “science of examining how to distribute scarce resources to address endless needs”. A more explicit way to understand this definition is to note that modern economics is based on the assumption of “the scarcity of resources and the infinity of needs”. The scarcity of resources is somewhat related to the concept of neediness. If humankind's mind, dominated by its desires and fancies, interpreted everything as a need then certainly all resources could be considered as scarce. However, if a clear distinction is made between what is actually needed and what is “desired”, then one could say that the world's resources are not actually scarce. Thus it is possible to say that modern economics treats the concept of needs and desires as essentially the same. According to Said Nursi, the desires of mankind are never-ending. Without doubt, it is not possible to satisfy our endless desires in this temporary and fleeting world. The desires that will be met here economically are, for the most part, constituting physical and corporal needs. The most important of these is that of food and drink, and Islamic terminology labels it under the term “sustenance”.

According to Bediuzzaman there are two forms of “sustenance”:

The first is that of genuine sustenance, which maintains the life of human beings. This sustenance has been safeguarded by Allah. If it was not embroiled with the abuse and misuse of human free will, everybody would be able to acquire these necessary forms of sustenance. For such things, neither the religion or dignity of a person can be forcibly bartered away.

The second is that of “figurative sustenance”. By way of exploitative practices and abuses, unnecessary needs have become deemed as necessary. Owing to various traditional practices, people have become addicted to certain things and

have not been able to abandon such habits. This form of sustenance is not under the guarantee or safeguard of Allah. It is a very expensive form of "sustenance". To acquire this form of sustenance means that sometimes a person will have to sacrifice his honour and dignity and become an abased creature who kisses the feet of lowly persons. Likewise, in this time of hardship and distress where the consciences of people are troubled by the anguish of the hungry and destitute - the taste of life, for those with a moral compass has become embittered by the illegitimate earning and usage of money in society.<sup>1</sup>

While the modern capitalist economy opens the door to squandering natural resources in order to gratify all degrees of desire and whim, Bediuzzaman opposes this strongly and explains that such a state of affair will cause great harms to inflict both the family and society.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Economic Development**

It is conventionally accepted that the development and expansion of the economy is directly related to and dependent on the degree of peoples' needs and wants that are satisfied, no matter how great in extent they are. Great importance was given to the Ottoman Turkish army which allowed us in that period to surmount the West, and indeed the field of military strength has retained its primacy. However, the greater part of the strength of the state arises from economic wealth and the military is a support to that. According to Said Nursi, economic development is related to and dependent on agriculture, industry and trade.<sup>3</sup> However, in the Ottoman period the muslims who served in the military and in the civil service were the primary component of the state, and in general - these two fields were the main imperative for the people. This was the reason for the decline in wealth and position of the muslims and the ascendancy of the non-muslims. For several centuries before, the muslim population of this country was in excess of forty million. The populace of non-muslims that you see in our country now was only around five million back then. Wealth and trade was in our hands at that time. However, our numbers tumbled down to around twenty million, and we descended into the mire of poverty. While the non-muslims managed to free themselves from the oppression of poverty, acquire wealth and increase their numbers to ten million. The most important reason for this is as follows: If there are four sons of yours; they would all tend to choose not to marry as a result of their ideas and considerations of military service. If they ever do marry, they would become pressured into entering the civil service and thus the products and fruits of their lives become wasted away, and they wander around from place to place like little kittens.<sup>4</sup>

1 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Lem'alar*, Sözlür Neşriyat, İstanbul 2009, s. 145 (İktisad Risalesi, 2. Nükte).

2 Bkz. Nursi, *Lem'alar*, s. 151 (İktisad Risalesi, 7. Nükte).

3 Nursi, *Münâzarat*, (Eski Said Dönemi Eserleri), Yeni Asya Neşriyat, İstanbul 2012, s. 253.

4 Nursi, *Münâzarat*, (Eski Said Dönemi Eserleri), s. 251-252.

The natural and legitimate way of life for sustenance lies in industry, agriculture and trade. The un-natural and abnormal ways lie in the pre-occupation with civil service, governorship and various types of administration. According to Said Nursi, regardless of the term that one uses - people who earn their livelihood as administrators and governors are actually a type of impotent beggar. However, Nursi states that this more fittingly implies to those types of governors who are tricksters and fraudsters. According to him, civil servants and managers did not enter their professions solely as a result of their patriotism or desire to serve the nation. However if they entered solely for the sake of personal benefit and vested interests, they would end up becoming a type of mean and stingy person.<sup>5</sup>

Because we were solely focused on civil and military service, we threw away our wealth and that of our generation.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Stages of Human Life

Bediuzzaman is not solely concerned with the lived stages and experiences of the past, and thus he also gives an important appraisal of those that concern the future. In total, Said Nursi has considered the stages of human development to consist of four periods: The period of savagery, the period of slavery, the period of serfdom, and the period of wage-earning. We are currently in the fourth period, which is the wage-earning period. However, just as humanity did not want to be chattel slaves, they also do not want to be wage-slaves.<sup>7</sup> Future humanity will evolve to a stage that Nursi terms as “The Stage of Ownership and Liberty”. Dr. Vehbi Kara’s relevant comments on this topic can be found in his article titled “Stages of Human Life and The Stage of Ownership and Liberty according to Said Nursi”.

### 4. Separate Allocation of Duties or a Policy of Mutual Partnership

In his “Treatise on Frugality”, Said Nursi writes “The All-Wise Maker created the human body in the form of a wonderful palace and resembling a well-ordered city. The sense of taste in the mouth is like a door-keeper, and the nerves and blood vessels like telephone and telegraph wires; they are the means by which the sense of taste communicates with the stomach, which is at the centre of the body, and informs it of the food that enters the mouth. If the body and stomach have no use for it, it says: “Forbidden!”, and expels it. And sometimes the food is harmful and bitter as well as not being beneficial for the body, and it spits it out immediately.”<sup>8</sup> In this paragraph, Bediuzzaman draws attention to the fact that the human body consists of various organs that have different duties and functions and that between them lies specific relationships and means of communication.

5 Nursi, *Münâzarat*, (Eski Said Dönemi Eserleri), s. 253.

6 Nursi, *Münâzarat*, (Eski Said Dönemi Eserleri), s. 254.

7 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Sözler* (Lemeât), Sözler Neşriyat, İstanbul 2012, s. 688.

8 Nursi, *Lem'alar*, s. 142 (İktisad Risalesi, 2. Nükte).

With the above statement, Bediuzzaman mentions one principle from amongst those fundamental to a type of modern management of business and government, namely the policy of “separation of duties”. Sometimes, modern economics refers to this with the other term, “division of labour”. In the arena of political life, this results in the policy of “separation of powers”.<sup>9</sup>

The main purpose behind the implementation of the division of labour, which is to prevent errors and corruption - has been the means of its dominant success. Thus labour is separated out into components and assigned to different individuals. The critical functions of management - though varying in size, structure and disposition - can be classified in four ways. These are; delegation, consignment, record keeping and account settlement. In a perfect system, no worker ends up taking responsibility for more than one function at one time.<sup>10</sup>

The term that Bediuzzaman used, is the concept of “partnership” which means a form of partnership. In the case of property partnerships, the term “Asset association” is used, for work “Association of Labour”, and for artisans it is “Association of Crafts”. While some losses have been specified with asset associations, their much more predominant benefit has been emphasized. With respect to this issue, Said Nursi states the following:

‘The worldly,’ and even certain politicians and secret societies and manipulators of society, have adopted as their guiding principle, that of shared property, in order to procure wealth and power. They do acquire an extraordinary strength and advantage, despite all their exploitation and losses...For it means that all the property passes to the hands of each partner.

“For example, there are four or five men. With the idea of sharing, one of them brings paraffin, another a wick, another the lamp, another the mantle, and the fifth matches; they assemble the lamp and light it. Each of them becomes the owner of a complete lamp. If each of those partners has a full-length mirror on a wall, he will be reflected in it together with the lamp and room, without deficiency or being split up.

“Craftsmen are obtaining significant wealth by co-operating so as to profit more from the own, and the fruit of their individual labour was three needles a day. Then following the rule of joint enterprise the ten men united. One brought the iron, one lit the furnace, one pierced the needles, one placed them in the furnace, and another sharpened the points, and so on; each was occupied with only part of the process of needle-making...The manufacturers divided up the work performed in accordance with the rule of joint enterprise and the division of labour: they saw that instead of three needles a day for each man, it worked out at three hundred. This event was widely published among the craftsmen of ‘the worldly’ in order to products of their crafts. Formerly ten manufacturers of sewing needles all worked on their encourage them to pool their labour.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Sami Uslu, “İktisat Risalesi Perspektifinden Küresel Kriz”, *Köprü Dergisi* (2009), Sy, 107.

10 Uslu, *agm.*, Sy, 107.

11 Nursi, *Lem'alar*, s. 169-170 (21. Lem'a, 4. Düsturunuz).

Bediuzzaman is not just concerned with seeing this division of labour in a material sense, as he also says that spiritual subjects are pertinent and this is pro- pounded in the Treatise of Sincerity mentioned previously. At the same time, it is an example indicating the sort of relationship that Nursi established between the material world and the spiritual world.

### **5. Hierarchy of Wastefulness**

The term “israf” (meaning ‘wastefulness and exorbitancy’), which arises from the root word “seref” - has been disseminated to describe the aims of those whose goal is the illegitimate usage of their property and means. The concept of “israf” in the Qur’an has been used in the following forms, (a) Idolatry and other forms of deviation from the way of Divine Unity, (b) Transgressions/Sins, (c) The forbid- ding of things that Allah has made lawful, (d) Somebody who gratuitously spends his property and wealth. Though over time the meaning of this term has become more limited - the books of jurisprudence, Tasawwuf, and personal morality re- ferred to it usually as the excessive spending of ones’ own wealth and property.<sup>12</sup>

Said Nursi’s commentary on the concept of “israf” is considerable in its ori- ginality. His understanding of “israf” (wastefulness) has been constituted in the following hierarchy:

a. Unlawful Acts: This is the greatest degree of wastefulness. Acts such as drinking, gambling, and adultery are strongly emphasized as both “haram” (for- bidden) and “israf” (wasteful) in various Qur’anic verses.

b. The overuse and misuse of lawful things: Bediuzzaman’s perspective cor- responds with the traditional understanding that it is wasteful to overuse and abuse things that are legally lawful. For example he makes it clear that it is regarded as wasteful for someone to take pleasure in food and drink after he has eaten his fill. With respect to the relevant Qur’anic ayet pertinent to this subject, namely “Eat and drink, but do not be wasteful”<sup>13</sup> - Nursi fondly points towards a commentary on the verse by Ibn Sina: “I concentrate the science of medicine in two lines, the best word is the shortest; when you eat, eat little, and do not eat again for four or five hours. Health lies in digestion. That is to say, eat so much as you can digest easily. The heaviest and most tiring thing for your stomach and yourself is to eat many things one on top of the other.”<sup>14</sup>

c. Preferring expensive things to meet one’s Halal needs:

Humans can address their material needs for nourishment with highly nutriti- ous foods such as cheese and eggs, but also they can turn to foods that leave more flavours in the mouth, such as baclava. In one sense, these two forms of food are

12 Cengiz Kallek, “İsraf”, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, XXIII, 178-179.

13 A’râf Sûresi, 31.

14 Nursi, *Lem’alar*, s. 142 (19. Lem’a, 2. Nükte).

essentially the same before they enter the mouth and after they have been swallowed. Though, in another it is recognised that cheese and eggs are better for one's health. While a sufficient amount of cheese and eggs may cost you around 5 lira, the same amount of baklava required to get one's fill usually costs 50 lira or more. Spending such amount of money for the baklava reflects the desire to satiate one's taste buds, rather than one's actual food needs. *"Thus, since the sense of taste is a doorkeeper, from the point of view of administering the body, the stomach is a master and a ruler. If the gifts arriving at the palace or city and those given to the palace's ruler are worth one hundred liras, only five liras' worth is appropriate for the doorkeeper in the form of a tip, lest he becomes conceited and is corrupted, then forgetting his duty he lets revolutionaries into the palace who will give him a big tip."*<sup>15</sup>

d. Wastefulness and charity: With respect to the subject of the relationship between wastefulness and benevolence, Said Nursi particularly prefers this statement from Abu Hanifa: "Just as waste is not benevolent, likewise there is no waste in benevolence". In accordance with this, it is not regarded as a good thing to bestow charity onto those not worthy of it.<sup>16</sup> It is thus judged as wasteful and unrighteous to overstep the mark and assist such unworthy people.

## 6. Ethics of Economy

In the context of economic history, it is possible to say that Said Nursi is among the best expounders and unifiers of the concept of economic activity with that of appropriate human morals. With regard to concepts of wastefulness, gratitude, persuasion, sentiment, stinginess, honour, abasement, industriousness and laziness, Nursi has provided superb commentaries placing them into the context of moral economic conduct. The Nineteenth Word (also known as "Treatises on Frugality") can be regarded as one of the foundational compositions that deal with the issue of economical ethics.

## 7. Relationship of economy with God's Grace

According to Bediuzzaman, the main aspect of economics is its face which looks toward the way of the All-Merciful. *"Yes, frugality is both a sort of thanks, and shows respect towards the divine mercy manifested in the bounties, and most definitely is the cause of plenty. So too, like abstinence, it is health-giving for the body, and since it saves a person from the degradation of what is in effect begging, is a cause of self-respect. It is also a powerful means of experiencing the pleasure to be found in bounties, and tasting that pleasure in bounties which apparently afford no pleasure."*<sup>17</sup>

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15 Nursi, *Lem'alar*, s. 151 (19. Lem'a, 3. Netice).

16 Nursi, *Lem'alar*, s. 148 (19. Lem'a, 6. Nükte).

17 Nursi, *Lem'alar*, s. 142 (19. Lem'a, 1. Nükte).

It is important that Bediuzzaman's views concerning economics and frugality inspire the production of several PHD theses in the near future. Thus far, there is solely the PHD work of Dr. Vehbi Kara which is based on Bediuzzaman's ideas of societal developmental stages. In our current issue, you will be able to find an article summarizing Dr. Kara's study. Other studies are also a clear indication of the sort of important ideas Bediuzzaman Said Nursi offered in the field of economics.

While you peruse our current issue on the subject of economics and frugality, I'd like to announce that the topic of our next issue will be on the subjects of Hadith and the Sunnah.

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