

The Peasant Economy of Anatolia in the Seventeenth Century: At the Margins of Subsistence and Market Conditions

Onur Usta

This paper is focused on the moral values of the peasant and nomadic economy in Ottoman Anatolia in the seventeenth century in the context of 'moral economy'. In a broad sense, the term 'moral economy' has been used by Polanyi and Thompson to refer to the traditional economic systems of the pre-modern societies where communal and exchange relationships were performed on a reciprocal and encouraging basis. With the development of modern economy driven by the capitalist mode of production, this traditional economic basis, which is based on justness and compassion, is gradually replaced by the market and market conditions shaped by the personal interests and avarice. This paper aims, by inspecting a set of archival documents (the sharia court registers of various regions, the registers of central governing bureau-mühimme defterleri, and the justice decrees-adaletname), to shed light on the Anatolian peasants and nomads' strategies to ward off threats on their subsistence economies and moral economic values in times of change and crisis in Ottoman History. In doing so, it is necessary to address the question of whether the threats against the moral values of the peasant economy stemmed from the penetration of market conditions into the rural economies of Anatolia or simply from the extra-economic factors such as the exactions of taxes by the greedy officials.

It maintains that the fiscal and military difficulties that began to gravely overwhelm the lands of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the seventeenth century necessitated an official definition on the limits of what was rational and reasonable/irrational and unreasonable in the eyes of peasants regarding the means of ensuring a livelihood. When the lists of peasants and nomads' grievances grew longer to protect the resources of their subsistence economies under threat of the encroachments by state officials and local elites, the moral principles for the preservation of basic economic needs of the peasantry were formulated through the justice decrees issued by the central governing bureau of Ottoman Empire during the reigns of Ahmed I (1603-1618) and Osman II (1618-1622). A moral stance with the peasants and nomads who struggled to make ends meet in times of a thriving monetized economy, on the other hand, contributed to the legitimization of the Sultanic despotism in the perception of tax-paying subjects. Upon the regicide of Osman II, the peasant and nomadic masses became frustrated for fear that the justified and legitimized values of their moral economy would be eroded and ultimately abolished in the absence of a protector state authority, which was embodied by the Sultan himself, at least according to the general public belief. This frustration turned into the anger of the masses with the revolt of Abaza Mehmed Pasha in 1623.