



**Deniz T. Kılınçoğlu**, *Economics and Capitalism in the Ottoman Empire*, London: Routledge, 2015, 224 pages

**Reviewer:** Muhlis Selman Saglam

### Introduction

The book under review consists of five chapters. In the first part, the author discusses the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman social structure and economic thought system. In the following three chapters this structure has been examined in detail by focusing on social change, development issues, imperialism, and industrialization. The last chapter summarizes author's views on the Ottoman economic thought system following which the author concludes his argument.

This work and issues addressed therein closely coincide with the theme of author's doctoral dissertation. It can be said that the period focused by the author is 19<sup>th</sup> century. Considering that this century was a period in which Ottoman thought had started to transform and the institutional and social effects of modernism had started to appear, the contents of the book can be understood better. Besides, if the other works of the author are examined, it can be noticed that this book provides a summary of his previous works as well. The author, who has reviewed the period of Abdulhamid II in his doctoral dissertation, examines the same period in this book as well. In addition, it will be seen that the author, who examined the Ottoman economic thought through looking into literary works in his book "Economics and Other Sciences", maintains a similar approach in this work.

### Evaluation and Discussion

The book deals with the period of Abdulhamid II, when the contact of Ottoman thought with Western thought increased significantly. In addition, the relationship



Research Assistant, Çanakkale 18 Mart University, Turkey. [selman.saglam@comu.edu.tr](mailto:selman.saglam@comu.edu.tr), [0000-0002-2035-221X](https://doi.org/10.26414/BR205)



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of this period with the previous and next periods was also considered. The main purpose of the book is to examine the role of the ideas of the bourgeois class and the ruling class throughout Ottoman modernization. The author does this by shedding light on social and cultural change rather than technical economic dynamics. The author's analysis of the Ottoman modernization over the period of the most controversial sultan, Abdulhamid II, also poses a challenge in itself. However, the author has handled this task reasonably. The author attributes his contextualization of the period of Abdulhamid II to the Sultan's determination for economic development, which is one of the most important features of modernism. The policies implemented in the field of development changed the socio-economic structures of the society such as education and transportation. In addition, the developments in this period and thought transformation shaped the foundation period of the Republic of Turkey. Therefore, the author emphasizes the importance of this period to understand the historical transformations in the Ottoman lands.

The author states that the motivation for writing the book is the absence of extensive and detailed studies in the literature generally in this field. However, when the book is examined, it is difficult to comment on the extent to which this book has fulfilled that deficiency. Although the book is 224 pages, it can be said that some chapters are repetitions. This situation poses a problem for the reader and makes it difficult to focus on the book. The emphasis on some names such as Ahmed Midhat in almost every chapter reflects one of these repetitions. Therefore, the author pens a long study that he thinks was absent in the literature, yet his own work seems to lack the required diversity in its contents. The author basically has sought answers to the following three questions in his detailed work (p. 2).

1) How did the reinterpretation of the economy in the modern period affect the Ottoman intellectuals?

2) What were the impacts of capitalist modernity experienced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on the strategy of the Ottoman Empire?

3) How have economic ideas and bourgeois values been disseminated to achieve social change by modernization efforts?

The author has sought answers to these questions through discursive practices. Therefore, the dominant languages in newspapers, magazines, and books of the period were examined. The most important and original contribution of the book is the emphasis on literature and the interpretation of the changing economic thought of the period through looking into literary works of the period.

The author has explained the concepts of modernity and modernization in the conceptual framework section, thereby aiming for a better understanding of Ottoman modernization. The author aims to verify his thesis within his understanding of modernism. According to this, names such as Ahmed Midhat, who advocated more protectionist policies compared to the liberal thinkers of the period, including Abdulhamid II, are names that can be named under the modernist identity. Therefore, in this work, the author partially opposes the view that liberal and protectionist policies are antipodal policies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman economic thought. In other words, protectionist policies in the short term should be replaced by liberal and free-market policies in the long term. This is the most important condition for development. The author explains his view by referring to the statesmen, intellectuals, and writers of the period. While explaining the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman economic thought, Kılınçoğlu states that names such as Mehmet Genç focused on why the Ottomans could not keep up with capitalism, and therefore missed that industrialization was not a stage where human history would come together in the Hegelian sense. However, the claim about Mehmet Genç that he sees the inability of the Ottomans to keep up with capitalism as a deficiency is controversial. Genç explained the Ottoman economic system based on three main principles and clearly stated that these principles operated with different premises than a capitalist economy (Genç, 2007).

In the first part of the book, the author's description of the intellectuals of the period that advocated Western-style free trade and an emphasis on what kind of competencies are required to understand this period make the book worth reading.

The author states in the first part that the backward economies should take the developed economies as an example and thus not fall into similar mistakes. However, it must be said that this approach is an evaluation with no consideration of moral values. It should not be overlooked what the criteria of development and backwardness are and which moral assumptions they are based on... In social sciences concepts are not value-free. So, getting in touch with a specific concept in a narrative requires capaciousness in every sense. Concepts we use even in daily language constitute an inseparable whole with moral principles, culture, ontological and epistemological existence. Another example can be given through the concept of pragmatism. The author stated that the Ottoman Empire approached the problems brought by modernism in a pragmatic framework. However, when pragmatism is evaluated through the arguments presented by names such as John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce, it would be disputable to state that the approach of Ottoman intellectuals described in the book was a pragmatist approach. Again, the author claims that the Ottoman economy was never closed to the outside.

However, adversative intellectuals such as Arnold J. Toynbee state that until the end of the 18th century, the Ottoman economy was completely under control and in a closed structure. However, we cannot see such a mention on this issue.

In the following chapters, Kılınçoğlu explains the transition from a structure in which the economy is shaped within the social structure into a system in which the social structure is shaped within economic acceptances through education and literature. If all this narrative is thought through Heidegger's concept of care<sup>1</sup>, the main question that the Ottoman intellectual tries to answer during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century can be formulized as "Why did the West do it but we couldn't?"

It can be said that the language of the work is generally plain and understandable. Such a feature of the language makes the book easier to read and understand. Throughout the book, the author addresses his issue through the intellectuals who support his main arguments. However, the question of to what extent these works were accepted by society remained a bit lacking. Considering the low rate of literacy in society, the positions of those who cannot follow the trend through books and magazines could be addressed to have a wider understanding of the period.

## Conclusion

As a result, although the book according to the author is a detailed study that was lacking in the literature, reconsideration of similar issues in different chapters has led to repetition. On the other hand, the point that intellectuals adopt protectionist policies in the short term while supporting free-market policies in the long term is the originality of the book. However, it can be said that conceptual expositions are not enough throughout the book. Nonetheless, the book is notable in that it examines the economic thought of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and Abdulhamid II period through social and cultural change. The sections analysing the literary works are another point that add originality to the work.

Another important point emphasized by the book is that advocating free market and liberal policies by the Ottoman intellectuals does not mean Western admiration and imitation. On the contrary, these are the people who both dominate classical Ottoman customs and culture and follow the developments in Western thought, and consequently seek policies according to the Ottoman political economy. The general message of the book is that intellectuals who are

1 A fundamental basis of our being-in-the-world is, for Heidegger, not matter or spirit but care (Welch, 2001 ).

said to defend protectionist and national policies do not approach liberal principles negatively. Therefore, it can be said that the ideal shift that occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an inevitable phenomenon.

### About the Author

*Deniz Kılınçođlu received his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University with his work titled "The Political Economy Of Ottoman Modernity: Ottoman Economic Thought During The Reign Of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909)". His research interests include 19th century Ottoman cultural and intellectual history, modern Middle Eastern history, and the history of economic thought.*

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