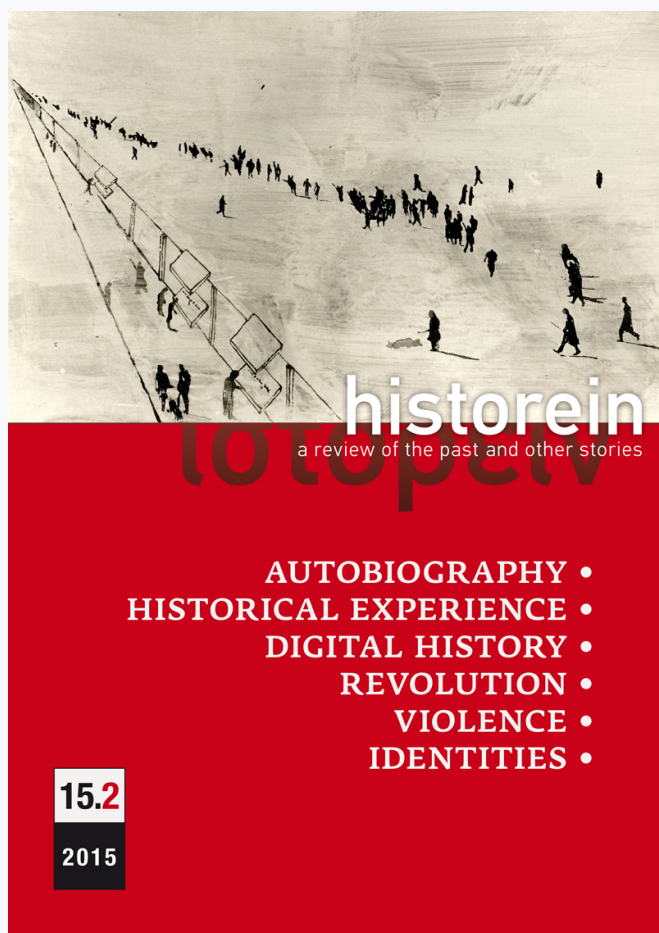


Historein

Vol 15, No 2 (2015)

Historein 15/2 (2015)



Review of Fatih Ermiş', A History of Ottoman Economic Thought: Developments Before the Nineteenth Century

Marinos Sariyannis

doi: [10.12681/historein.320](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.320)

Copyright © 2015, Marinos Sariyannis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Sariyannis, M. (2016). Review of Fatih Ermiş', A History of Ottoman Economic Thought: Developments Before the Nineteenth Century. *Historein*, 15(2), 87–91. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.320>

tural history of the Thompsonian kind would have shown us better how workers in Cyprus began to think of themselves, under the guidance of communists, as members of “the working class”.

Theory, however, never burdens the flow of this very well-written book. The narrative remains at all times engaging while the transitions from chapter to chapter and section to section are always fluid. In concluding this review, it must be stressed that Katsourides’ work is important not only for the historiography of Cyprus, but also and more broadly, through the clear case study it analyses, to colonial studies and, more specifically, political mobilisation under European colonial rule.

NOTES

- 1 For more dynamic representations of Ottoman Cyprus, see Marc Aymes, *A provincial history of the Ottoman empire: Cyprus and the eastern Mediterranean in the nineteenth century* (London: Routledge, 2013) and Antonis Hadjikyriacou, “Society and economy on an Ottoman island: Cyprus in the eighteenth century” (PhD diss., University of London, 2011).
- 2 Diana Markides, *Sendall in Cyprus, 1892–1898: a governor in bondage* (Nicosia: Moufflon, 2014).
- 3 Ranajit Guha, “The prose of counter-insurgency,” in *Selected subaltern studies*, eds Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 45–87 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45, 47.
- 4 Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, “Beyond identity,” *Theory and Society* 29/1 (2000): 1–47.

Fatih Ermiş

A History of Ottoman Economic Thought: Developments Before the Nineteenth Century

London: Routledge, 2014. xiv + 212 pp.

Marinos Sariyannis

Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FORTH,
Rethymno

In recent decades, one may say that the historiography of the Ottoman empire has embarked in new directions and unexplored fields, from consumption studies to *histoire des mentalités*. One area that has remained somehow underdeveloped is the history of ideas or, as it is now more fashionable to say, intellectual history. With the possible exception of the history of political thought, which has seen some valuable contributions recently, Ottoman philosophical, theological and even scientific ideas are still relatively unknown. Apart from a few pioneering articles, such as Halil İnalcık’s famous discussion of the “Ottoman economic mind” or Metin Kunt’s seminal paper on the views of the historian Na’ima on elite entrepreneurship (and also a few of books in Turkish),¹ Fatih Ermiş’ book is the first in a non-Turkish language to examine Ottoman economic thought in a comprehensive way. As such, it is a more than welcome contribution to Ottoman studies.

The book in question is divided into six chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction (chapter one), the author sets out to describe his approach; after discussing the various definitions of economics and the possibility of their application in the Ottoman case (here one should note that Ermiş’ effort to approach his subject “from within” is commend-

able), he assesses briefly the descriptions of the Ottoman economic mentality by Sabri Ülgener, Ahmet Güner Sayar and Mehmet Genç. Finally he announces his aims ("to depict the main parameters of Ottoman economic thinking"), gives a short outline of the study and describes (in a rather inadequate way) the sources he used: these are chronicles (the right term should rather be "historiography"), *siyâsetnâmes* (texts containing political advice; the description takes them as a simple continuation of "Islamic" political thought), memoranda or *lâyihâs* (a term that actually refers to a specific set of memoranda submitted to Selim III at the end of the eighteenth century), descriptions of embassies abroad and imperial orders. Chapter two ("A discussion of the concepts and terminology") is actually a glossary of Ottoman terms on taxation, money, administration, philosophy, etc, sometimes more (and more often less) analytical than one should expect and which contains some mistakes: for instance, *çiftâne* (19) is not an Ottoman term (it is a combination of two terms, meaning "pair of oxen, peasant plot" and "rural household", respectively, coined by İnalcık to form the basis of his own theory for the character of the Ottoman economy); a *sipahi* was not "granted a *mukâta'a* for his lifetime" (20); *mîrî* was not the "inner treasury" (21); Christian boys recruited under the *devşirme* system were not trained for the *medreses* or religious-judicial schools (28); the *ulema* were more than the "class of teachers" (28).

The actual body of the book begins with chapter three ("Ideas about the formation and functioning of society"), where Ermiş maintains that the humoral theory and the concept of justice as equilibrium are the parameters that define Ottoman approaches to the economy. He first embarks on a detailed account of Ottoman views on the beginnings of human society, mostly formulated in an Aristotelian vein,²

and then cites in length the description of the humoral theory by Na'ima and Ibn Khaldun, adding digressions on Ottoman moral philosophy and theories of the soul (and here Ermiş is quite right in stressing that a full knowledge of Ottoman philosophy is also indispensable for an in-depth understanding of Ottoman economic views). Next he proceeds to expose "the humour theory of the state", that is, the idea that society is composed of four classes (or, perhaps more accurately, estates), namely the men of the pen, the men of the sword (which, surprisingly, Ermiş identifies exclusively as "bureaucrats" (33, 48, 52), missing the point that this analysis often serves as a basis for an attack on the excessive number of janissaries), the merchants and the peasants, which correspond to the four humours of Galenic medicine (blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile). The corollary is that, just as a doctor seeks to keep the balance among these humours in the human body, so must the four classes be kept in an equilibrium. Ermiş presents this theory as exposed by Na'ima in the early eighteenth century. However, it is to be noted that the introduction of humoral theory into the traditional four-fold division of society (so far identified with the four elements) was made by Kâtib Çelebi half a century earlier; Ermiş is aware of the similarity of Kâtib Çelebi's views (72, n. 3) but not of his being the model for Na'ima. More generally, the genealogy of seventeenth-century economic and political views is lacking, Na'ima having in fact combined Kâtib Çelebi's text with a faithful following of Ibn Khaldun's theory. The chapter ends with a discussion of the "circle of justice", that is, the ancient Middle Eastern concept (as shown recently by Linda Darling)³ of justice as the guarantor of social welfare: a king needs an army, the army needs wealth, wealth is produced by the peasants, and the peasants need the king's justice. Ermiş' sources here are as diverse as Kinalızâde Ali's late-sixteenth-century ethical

treatise, Kâtib Çelebi's mid-seventeenth-century political works and Ibn Khaldun's history, but he does not make clear how and when Ibn Khaldun influenced Ottoman thought. One could also suggest that the analysis of justice could be supplemented by a discussion of another princely virtue, generosity.⁴

In chapter four ("The concept of household economy (*'ilm tadbîr al-manzil*)"), Ermiş reverts to Kinalızâde to expose what Ottoman economic theory is *stricto sensu*, that is, the part of ethical theory corresponding to the ancient Greek *oikonomikos*. Occasionally drawing on Ibn Khaldun as well, the author discusses the views on money (considered as a kind of universal law), crafts and trades and the categorisations thereof, and on licit and illicit ways of saving and spending money (again with the well-known emphasis on the middle way). One should note that these views were taken almost wholesale from the Persian neo-Aristotelianism of Nâsir al-Dîn Tûsî and Jalâl al-Dîn Dawwânî. In my opinion, Ermiş rightly observes the shift from trade to agriculture as the most virtuous profession (92), a shift far too important to be covered in just one sentence. A large part of this chapter concerns Na'ima's discussion of Dervîş Mehmed Pasha (d. 1655), an administrator who also made a fortune from commercial activity, a practice generally condemned by Ottoman political thinkers. In this section, Ermiş' analysis would have benefited greatly from a closer examination of the historical context, as described in Kunt's important article.

Chapter five ("Regulation") deals with a rather more narrow subject, namely regulation of price ceilings (*narh*). After exposing the traditional opinion of Islamic jurisprudence, which did not favour this kind of state intervention, Ermiş discusses the views of the Ottomans and their effort to advocate this practice, which was

a standard policy of the Ottoman state. This discussion is highly interesting, and it would be even more so were it placed in its historical context. Moreover, Ermiş examines market supervision (*hisbe*) and the views exposed by major pre-Ottoman jurists on it (in fact, there is nothing Ottoman in this discussion).

In Chapter six ("Economic thinking at the end of the classical system"), Ermiş moves to the late eighteenth century, when the need for reform became dominant in Ottoman political thought. The author focuses in two figures, Süleyman Penah Efendi (d. 1785) and his political treatise, unduly ignored by modern scholars, and Ebubekir Ratîb Efendi and his voluminous report on his Vienna embassy (1791–92). However, in analysing their views, Ermiş also includes fragments from early- and mid-nineteenth-century authors, as well as the memoranda submitted by various members of the high bureaucracy to Selim III before the latter embarked on his reform projects (other authors could be added as well, such as Behîc Efendi, whom Ermiş only mentions on p. 174). Ermiş examines these authors' opinions on the state, the legitimisation of authority and change, bureaucracy and corruption, trade and money, showing skilfully that, although they were not lacking in a detailed knowledge of western European ways, they still followed the basic premises of the Ottoman worldview as described in the previous chapters of the book.

Finally, chapter seven ("Real economic application") attempts "to illustrate the application of these ideas in real economic and social life". Ermiş' analysis is structured along Mehmed Genç's thesis, namely that the Ottoman economic mentality was based on provisionism, traditionalism and fiscalism. Drawing on imperial orders (*hatt-ı hümayun*) and secondary literature, the author analyses briefly the fluctuations in monetary policies, the regulation of

prices and the care taken to provision Istanbul, the taxation of merchants and imperial policies towards foreign trade. In the conclusion (192–97), Ermiş essentially recapitulates and summarises the previous chapters, stressing that he did not seek to find modern economic concepts and theories but instead the views of Ottomans themselves. As he points out, “every attempt to understand the economic thought of any pre-capitalistic culture should, at the same time, be an attempt to understand the social, political, religious or even linguistic characteristics of that culture” (197). Indeed, the conclusion is much more coherent than the rest of the book and could stand alone as a separate article.

One may remark that the logic of this structure is somehow difficult to grasp: it is not built along ideological trends, nor along sectors of economic thought; Sunna-minded views (chapter five) are inserted between aspects of the *falasifa* Aristotelian tradition, and the second chapter would perhaps fit better as a part of the introduction or as an appendix. Indeed, the most serious shortcoming in Ermiş’ approach is his reductionism: his account dismantles Ottoman views of every historical dimension, as if there was only one distinct Ottoman thread of thought (at least before the mid-eighteenth century). History is absent: not only is the pre-Ottoman origin of Kinalızâde’s ideas ignored, for instance, but also no sense of development can be discerned (a typical example is the quotation on p. 43, where Ermiş unifies two different texts, both undated, in one citation). There is no place in this book either for the variety of approaches (as, for example, Sunna-minded vs. *falasifa* views) or for intra-Ottoman controversies, such as the debates on landholding and cash donations in the mid-sixteenth century (Ermiş argues that these issues concern economic history rather than economic thinking (10), but then his discus-

sion of price regulations begs for further justification) or the “fundamentalist” policies in the late seventeenth century. Furthermore, Ermiş chooses to ignore selectively the Islamic views on state income and expenditure, commonly exposed by authors such as Dede Cöngî (late sixteenth century) or Na’ima under the rubric *bayt al-mâl*. The neglect of ideological trends shows itself very clearly on p. 12 (and in chapter five), where the author seems to regard the late-seventeenth-century controversy on price regulation as an aspect of the conflict between westernisers and traditionalists, rather than between Islamic and Ottoman tradition.

Among the advantages of the book, one should note that it always seeks to put economic ideas within a more general framework; Ermiş has always an ideal Ottoman *Weltanschauung* in mind, and his effort to connect economic thought with philosophical and moral views is commendable. Perhaps it is because of this commitment that he rightly stresses the importance of humoural theory and of the concept of justice as a balance for Ottoman thought and practice. In the same vein, he insightfully remarks that “the similarity of society to the human body is not just a source of inspiration” (57) and that it was used for specific remarks and suggestions on each of the four classes, in contrast to contemporary European views. In short, this is a valuable book which explores a hitherto little known aspect of Middle Eastern history; one could only wish that it was written with a more acute sense of historical development.

NOTES

- 1 Halil İnalçık, “The Ottoman economic mind and aspects of the Ottoman economy,” in *Studies in the economic history of the Mid-*

dle East, ed. M. A. Cook (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 207–18; İbrahim Metin Kunt, “Derviş Mehmed Paşa, vezir and entrepreneur: a study in Ottoman political-economic theory and practice,” *Turcica* 9 (1977): 197–214. Surprisingly, the latter is missing from the bibliography of the book under review.

- 2 Ermiş cites an anonymous *Nasihatname* (“advice book”) from the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. or. oct. 1598. See n. 2, 72; on this text cf. Rhoads Murphey, “Solakzade’s treatise of 1652: a glimpse at operational principles guiding the Ottoman state during times of crisis,” *Beşinci Milletlerarası Türkiye Sosyal ve İktisat Tarihi Kongresi Tebliğleri*, vol. 1 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1990), 27–32; repr. in Rhoads Murphey, *Essays on Ottoman historians and historiography* (Istanbul: Eren, 2009), 43–48.
- 3 Linda T. Darling, *A history of social justice and political power in the Middle East: the circle of justice from Mesopotamia to globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- 4 Cf. Marinos Sariyannis, “The princely virtues as presented in Ottoman political and moral literature,” *Turcica* 43 (2011): 121–44.

Vassilios Bogiatzis

Μετεώρος μοντερνισμός: τεχνολογία, ιδεολογία της επιστήμης και πολιτική στην Ελλάδα τον Μεσοπολέμον (1922–1940)

[Suspending modernism: technology, the ideology of science and politics in interwar Greece, 1922–1940]

Athens: Eurasia. 2012. 496 pp.

Manolis Patiniotis

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Modernism and modernity sometimes occur in the same phrase in Vassilios Bogiatzis’ work. For those unfamiliar with the interwar period, this may be a bit confusing. However, understanding the difference between the two terms is necessary for the reader to follow the rich exposition of one of the most tense periods in modern Greek history. Modernism, notwithstanding the impossibility of an incontestable definition, is the reaction to the first crisis of modernity. Bogiatzis mostly follows Wagner in describing the first crisis of modernity as the reaction to the second Industrial Revolution (1870–1918).¹ Already from the mid-nineteenth century, a critical discourse had emerged that targeted “out-of-control technology”. Despite the romantic origins of this discourse, over the course of time the social, economic and political consequences of the second Industrial Revolution combined with pervasive feelings of insecurity and social disorientation. The interwar period witnessed the culmination of the crisis, a development that gradually led from the “restricted” to “organised” modernity.

One important outcome of this sequence was the gradual realisation on the part of both the