

## Historein

Vol 21, No 1 (2023)

Where was 1821? Space and Territory in the Greek Revolution



Review of Nikos Potamianos, ed., Εκδοχές της ηθικής οικονομίας: Ιστορικές και θεωρητικές μελέτες

Christos Efstathiou

doi: [10.12681/historein.28024](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28024)

Copyright © 2024, Christos Efstathiou



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:

Efstathiou, C. (2023). Review of Nikos Potamianos, ed., Εκδοχές της ηθικής οικονομίας: Ιστορικές και θεωρητικές μελέτες : [Variants of moral economy: Historical and theoretical studies]. *Historein*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28024>



Nikos Potamianos, ed.  
*Εκδοχές της ηθικής οικονομίας: Ιστορικές και θεωρητικές μελέτες*  
[Variants of moral economy: Historical and theoretical studies]

**Christos Efstathiou**  
doi: 10.12681/historein.28024

To cite this article:

Efstathiou, Christos. 2023. "Nikos Potamianos, ed., *Εκδοχές της ηθικής οικονομίας: Ιστορικές και θεωρητικές μελέτες* [Variants of moral economy: Historical and theoretical studies]". *Historein* 21 (1).

<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.28024>.

Nikos Potamianos, ed.

*Εκδοχές της ηθικής οικονομίας: Ιστορικές και θεωρητικές μελέτες*

[Variants of moral economy: Historical and theoretical studies]

Rethymno: Institute for Mediterranean Studies, 2021. 399 pp.

Christos Efstathiou

University of Birmingham

Moral economy as a concept has a peculiar history. The idea that morality and economy are connected can be traced to ancient times; however, the concept was most probably invented in the eighteenth century and ran a parallel life with that of political economy for some time before its spectacular re-emergence in the 1970s. Obviously, for several social scientists, it was E. P. Thompson's approach that made it an important concept in humanities and social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Thompson (treading a path that British "Guild Socialists" and Karl Polanyi had trodden before him)<sup>2</sup> showed how market forces eroded the moral grounding that once guided human societies, triggering sporadic eruptions of social unrest in early modern times. Several other scholars, however, developed a slightly different approach. Eric R. Wolf, for instance, showed how Mesoamerican peasants resisted capitalist encroachment.<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott argued that peasant revolts were based on "subsistence ethics" as a consequence of food shortages in twentieth-century Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> Bringing moral economy into twentieth-century politics enabled several scholars to distance the concept from its former identification with early modern English rioters or colonised peasant societies.

This edited volume brings together studies by historians, social anthropologists, philosophers and political scientists who use moral economy in order to understand phenomena such as popular protest, collective action, populism, solidarity, criticism of capitalism and liberalism in modern Greece. It is an end product of the research programme "Morality and Economy; Issues of Morality in the Public Discourse about Market and Profit in Greece, Late Nineteenth Century–First Half of the Twentieth Century" and a conference on "Moral Economy" (11–12 September 2020).

The work begins with an introduction by Nikos Potamianos, who offers a meticulous study of the use of moral economy by historians and social scientists. Special attention is

paid to the history of consumption as well as to the connection between morality, economy and labour. Potamianos attempts to conceptualise moral economy by offering a narrow and broad definition. The narrow one follows the Thompsonian paradigm to a point and suggests that moral economy refers to common values that promote community, reciprocity and solidarity; the opposition to market laws; the collective strives that support this opposition; and the defence of acquired rights and the protection of existing ones. The broad definition refers to a coherent set of values and perceptions guiding social, economic and political attitudes that do not seek to maximise personal benefit, oppose the expansion of market logic and advocate reciprocity, solidarity and mutual solidarity. Under this prism, the moral economy does not need to have popular support or take a defensive character.

In many ways, the book tries to justify this latter, broader definition that aims to move beyond Thompson and Scott's efforts. The first part of the book includes studies of food crises and popular protests in the Ottoman Empire (Eleni Gara) and the Epirus region after becoming part of Greece (Vasilis Georgakis). The second and third parts look at the world of labour in the first half of the twentieth century, including a comparative study of the different forms of trade unionism and moral perceptions of working-class strata (Kostas Paloukis); an analysis of the reactions of cigarette makers and carriage drivers in a time of modernisation (Nikos Alexis); an examination of the contrasting moral arguments around lockouts between employers and workers in tobacco factories and coastal shipping (Nikos Leonidakis); an exploration of the different moral perceptions of Athens shopkeepers regarding state protectionism (Nikos Potamianos); an inquiry into the fair distribution of goods and the stabilisation of prices in Thessaloniki under occupation (Kostas Fountanopoulos); and an investigation of the different ethical frameworks that the National Liberation Front (EAM) and the collaborationist government worked in as the food crisis and black market problem worsened during Greece's occupation by the Axis powers (Konstantinos Lambrakis).

The last two parts of the book contribute more broadly to an interdisciplinary approach towards the study of moral economy. Here, there are pieces of intellectual history examining the early socialist Nicholaos Exarchos (Vicky Karafoulidou) and the conservative Panagiotis Kanellopoulos (Eleni Kaklamanou); anthropological studies approaching the hospitality of the exiled communists in Ikaria by locals as a form of gift (Eleni Mamoulaki) and the requests for relief or debt repayment by borrowers during the Greek government debt crisis as forms of moral obligation (Dimitra Kofti); philosophical studies comparing Hume and Smith's liberal philosophical positions on private property, justice and ethics to the moral economy of the crowd in the eighteenth century (Dionysis Drosos); and political analyses explaining moral economy as a function in the articulation of popular demands and the delimitation of populist rhetoric (Yannis Stavrakakis).

Undoubtedly, the work is an important contribution to social science as it informs the

Greek literature on the subject and enriches the research work in the field, providing conceptual tools for historical, anthropological and political analysis. Amplifying the term has led to new interpretations of a variety of different social, cultural and political behaviours, practices and forms of action related to moral economy. Moral economy is not seen as a coherent group of ethical perceptions of the early modern world, but as a heterogeneous set of various concepts and practices. Thus, the authors can use the concept as a methodological tool to trace the relationship of patronage and reciprocity, explore the interaction between local markets and financial centres and reveal the intrinsic connection between the right to survival and the right to development in different areas and periods of time.

Needless to say, there are also important issues that need to be taken into consideration. These include questions regarding the assumed homogeneity between peasants and the urban working class, the attachment of these groups to communal ideals and the interaction between people's demands and "elite" rhetoric. Most of these questions are connected to the problem of amplifying the term without addressing how the moral economy and social embeddedness have been equally transformed through time. Such a historical approach can enable historians to look at moral economy as a developing category, leaving behind less helpful concepts, such as "moral syndicalism" or "fair economy", and avoiding the dangers of "conceptual stretching".<sup>5</sup>

To put it differently, the universality of the concept of moral economy needs to be denoted (or, otherwise, contested). Is it possible to place the food riots in the Ottoman Empire and the recent requests for debt repayment in the same "grand narrative"? Did the development of empires have any impact on the notions of economic justice? How do forms of premodern anticapitalism differ from contemporary utopianism? What is the role of women and migrants in the transformation of moral economy? Is there a moral economy for the upper classes? And if moral economy is part of a strategy of contention, what distinguishes it from other activities? Here, the classic texts on the subject cannot be used as handbooks for this kind of historical exegesis.

If one chooses a broad definition of moral economy, then one must be careful as the political assumptions that give birth to modern moral economies coexist with new ideas about ethics and economics. After the First World War, as suggested by several studies in this volume, a "new moral economy" was evidenced, influenced either by war economy or modern socialism. However, a question can be raised here: what distinguishes this new moral economy from moral polity? In reality, what some authors describe as moral economy can also be understood as a form of political moralism that incorporates variants of social democracy, petty bourgeois socialism and other radical or utopian forms of political action. If there is a connection to moral economy, then the inherited characteristics of the older forms of moral economies may need to be traced.

Moreover, if we accept that ethics and economy as a political project are two interconnected forms of social consciousness, then it is necessary to clarify their dialectical

relationship in a wider sociocultural perspective. The need to pair these two concepts appears predominantly with the rise of capitalism. The consolidation of the capitalist market reduced morality to a utilitarian calculation. Counterbalancing this, the lower classes worked out their own morality, inventing forms of moral economy, among other tactics. Still, the practices of the old moral economy began to decline with the advent and consolidation of capitalist labour relations. Moral economy now gave way to new forms of economic ethics of various principles, from bourgeois forms of moral consumption to radical forms of moral socialism.

This new economic ethics cannot be merely presented as radical “politics from below”; otherwise, there is a risk of an obsessive focus on strikes, riots and rebellions, ignoring the fact that every economy involves some form of ethics and the importance of everyday modes of moral defence or reprisal. What is much more useful is to see how these different economic ethics are contrasted with each other as forms of hegemonic and counterhegemonic politics, and certain studies of this volume point towards this direction. Such an approach can illuminate the relationship between national or transnational state actors and grassroots popular forms of contestation. Following this Gramscian approach,<sup>6</sup> it can be revealed how social stability was achieved through a mixture of coercion and consent to the ideology of the ruling groups.

However, the role of the economy in the relationship between ethics and economics also needs to be emphasised for two reasons. First, for any student of moral economy, the main concern should be how economic activities took a moral character and ultimately shaped other forms of social and political life. Although the evaluation of norms and motivations that structure economic practices is essential, the reverse course of the analysis is equally important. Second, such an approach can help researchers understand the historical limits of moral economies. Insofar as all economic activities are based on moral norms, the specific limitations of moral economic actions require further study.

Last but not least, future researchers need to be concerned with the popularity and use of the term moral economy in social sciences despite its usefulness and effectiveness. Even if one agrees with many economists, such as Amartya Sen and Michael J. Sandel,<sup>7</sup> that it is wrong to view markets in a technocratic way as ethically neutral mechanisms, it is just as important to reflect on the politicisation of the term from those who continue to be fascinated by a future pointing to the past, especially in a period that market logics have penetrated each niche of social relations. Moral economy – not as a new political dogma but as a tool for critical historical analysis – can allow studies and comparisons between different ideologies and political traditions of the modern world. It is a direction that this book, which deserves to be read by people within and beyond academia, has taken quite successfully.

- <sup>1</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).
- <sup>2</sup> Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R. H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E. P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1973).
- <sup>4</sup> James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
- <sup>5</sup> Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970): 1033–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1958356>.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Rogers, "Stirring Words, Ruling Ideas, and the Price of Bread: Reflections on a Gramscian-Thompsonian Approach to Cultural History," *Past Imperfect* 10 (2004): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.21971/P7C013>.
- <sup>7</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Penguin, 2012).