

A Simple Approach to Overcoming Euro-Specific Feudalism

Avrupa'ya Özgü Feodalizmin Üstesinden Gelmek İçin Bir Yaklaşım



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Abstract: In debates over the nature of the Ottoman social formation, most 20th century Turkish historians have tended to argue that it was “not feudal.” I argue that this is mostly because of the extent to which they have unconsciously imported and internalized Eurocentrism. In particular, it is because they have been using a Euro-specific notion or definition of feudalism as their yardstick. Also involved is a methodological, indeed philosophical failure to differentiate between genus and species, between the specific and the general. What is common to most agrarian states and societies in pre-modernity is the existence of a fief-system. But once a royal power-center resorts to fief-distribution, different power configurations can result. It is this revisionist approach to taxonomy that is proposed in this article, derived from my recently completed PhD thesis on civilizations’ common structures.

Keywords: Feudalism, Power-configuration, Oriental Despotism, Asiatic Mode of Production, Ottoman

Özet: Osmanlı toplumsal oluşumunun doğasına ilişkin tartışmalarda, 20. yüzyıl Türk tarihçilerinin çoğu bunun “feodal olmadığını” iddia etme eğilimindedirler. Bunun Avrupa merkeziliğinin bilinçsizce ithal edilerek içselleştirmelerinden kaynaklandığını iddia edilmektedir. Bunun nedeni özellikle Avrupa'ya özgü bir feodalizm kavramını veya tanımını kıstas olarak kullanıyor olmalarıdır. Ayrıca cins ve tür arasında, özel ve genel arasında ayırım yapma konusundaki metodolojik, aslında felsefi bir başarısızlık da söz konusudur. Modernite öncesi tarım devletlerinin ve toplumlarının çoğunda ortak olan şey, bir tımar sisteminin varlığıdır. Ancak bir kraliyet güç merkezi, tımar dağıtımına başvurduğunda, farklı güç konfigürasyonları ortaya çıkabilir. Bu makalede önerilen, uygarlıkların ortak yapıları üzerine yakın zamanda tamamladığım doktora tezimden türetilen, taksonomiye yönelik bu revizyonist yaklaşımdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feodalizm, Güç Yapılandırması, Doğu Despotizmi, Asya Tipi Üretim Tarzı, Osmanlı

1. Introduction

We keep talking about overcoming the adverse effects of Eurocentrism and Orientalism as part of a broader task of reconstructing the humanities and social sciences, but this cannot be achieved through general observations or blanket condemnations. Instead, it can only be done through in-depth critiques of specific cases where Eurocentrism manifests itself in a peculiar way, leading to proposals for alternative solutions. One such area is Ottoman land tenure. Was the timar system, including the entirety of social relations it embodied, feudal or not? Generations of Turkish historians have posed this question, mostly to answer it in the negative.

Early in the 20th century, many European Medievalists, too, would have agreed, though this may no longer be the case.¹ This is not merely a cold and dry classification problem. It is the underlying arguments that are more interesting. To a large extent they have to do with intellectual history and historiography, with the history of historical ideas. I would argue that the fundamental problem is the uncritical yet still hugely widespread use of a Euro-specific notion or definition of feudalism. For a start, it is European historians who have conceptualized feudalism in a peculiarly narrow way. Parallel to the ascendancy of Europe from c.1500 onward, the modern discipline of History also developed in Europe, in the hands of European historians, reflecting European elites' gaze on themselves (including their own past) as well as on the past and present of other societies around them. In time, this vision of history, including a comprehensive vocabulary as well as the four-part conventional periodization of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Early Modern Era and the Modern Era that we still keep using, became part and parcel of an emerging European ideological hegemony that shaped education, schools, universities, textbooks, curricula and scholarly translations in many countries. It was in this context, as part of this global process, that Turkish (and probably other non-European) historians and social scientists, too, adopted these concepts, and started to

¹ For European Medievalists, this would have been a matter of Western superiority over the East. The Orientalistic view was that feudalism was better than non-feudalism. Feudalism implied or embraced: decentralization, limited kingship, the autonomy of cities, contractual rights, hence guarantees for private property. Together, these were taken to constitute the foundations of Western progress and development (into democracy and a market economy). Conversely, the absence of feudalism was taken as having made all such development impossible. For a summary of such arguments, see Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book* (Chicago, 1988), Chapter 6, *The Coercive Order and its Erosion*, esp. 158–170. In contrast, Turkish nationalist historians like Ömer Lütfi Barkan adhered to an Occidentalistic view. He and his followers argued that Ottoman non-feudalism was better and more advanced than European feudalism. Feudalism meant an arbitrary and oppressive lordship. The Ottoman system represented a just and fair imperial régime of taxation by law. On all this, see Halil Berktaş, *The "Other" Feudalism: A Critique of 20th Century Turkish Historiography and Its Particularisation of Ottoman Society* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1990).

use them indiscriminately and in uncritical fashion. It is my hope to suggest an alternative -- indeed not so much to suggest it from scratch as to elaborate and reinforce it, since it already exists in the scholarly literature.

2. Remunerating the State Apparatus

In a path-breaking new approach to world history that entails a major effort to break away from Eurocentrism, Clive Ponting has noted that societies acquire greater civilizational distinctiveness at elite levels and texts (Ponting, 2000). Conversely, as we go further and further down the social scale, the more similar do they appear. It is with these basic structures that I begin. I try to combine empirical history with social theory. If there is going to be a state, first there has to be an economy capable of surplus production in order to sustain this state. This means reminding ourselves of the universality of peasant economies and societies. Secondly, if there is going to be a state, there must be a sustainable state apparatus. That is to say, there must be what Jared Diamond refers to as non-economic specialists, i.e. specialists in governance, administration and warfare (Diamond, 1999). There must, in other words, be a ruler (a king or sultan), and around him and below him, an army, a central administration, and a provincial administration (comprising a hierarchy of governors and sub-governors or their equivalent). In fact, this was just about what early states had.² Then the key question becomes remuneration. All people in these and similar positions must somehow be compensated for their work and loyalty. Most fundamentally, as semi-tribal war-leaders grow through chiefs into founders of dynasties, they have to be able to hold on to their fighting force, whether (like themselves) of a semi-tribal or a more orderly nature. Up to some point, this can be done by customarily redistributing movable booty. This can be done relatively easily as long as we are talking of small communities and small spaces. But when the spoils of war acquire the form of territory, or land with peasants living on it and cultivating it, a new form of institutionalization becomes necessary.

So the question of how to pay for the state apparatus becomes crucial. In turn, this gives rise to a broad contrast between cash-based states and fief-based states. It depends on (a) the level of monetization, and (b) transport and communications technology (Berkta, 1987; Berkta and Faroqi, 1992). In brief, modern states are cash-based states

² As described by Clive Ponting, *World History*, p. 143: "The functions of these early states and empires were extremely limited. They had only very small bureaucracies to carry out government functions, and there was often little distinction made between the activities of the ruler's private household and the state. Their main aim was to collect taxes and maintain an army for external and internal control."

because the existence of a developed market economy, where money is the accepted medium of exchange and there is plenty of it in circulation, enables them to collect cash taxes and pay cash salaries. In contrast, most pre-modern states in Antiquity or the Middle Ages were unable to do so. Instead, they had to rely on payment by land or payment through grants of tax collection rights. This gave rise to the fief-based state. Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India, the Middle East, Byzantium, Medieval Europe, the Islamic Caliphate or subsequent Turkish-Islamic states all fall in this category because sooner or later, in one way or another, they created and ran a fief system ((Berktaý,1987).

3. The Universality of Fief-System

As Clive Ponting (2000, p.145) puts it with regard to the common morphology and pattern of Early Empires in Eurasia:

In new empires the initial rulers had to solve three linked problems -- how to reward their followers, how to control the newly conquered areas and how to maintain an army. The solutions had to be based on a fundamental constraint -- land was almost the only asset and form of wealth. The solutions adopted were nearly always the same -- the grant of conquered land to individuals within the elite so that they could use it to support a given number of soldiers to be provided to the ruler when required. (This system is called 'feudalism' in European history but it is merely one form of a phenomenon that was common across Eurasia for several millennia.)

What is interesting here is that Ponting takes note of both a general category and also differences within it. In one way, all these varieties of conditional land grants (or fiefs or fief-systems) are functionally equivalent; that is to say, they fulfill the same basic need or requirement. But this is not to say that they are the "same" in every way. Of course they have differences, and in the course of time, as a result of further development in various geographies and cultural settings, some of these differences become more obvious. As a result, seemingly disparate states, forms of government, and power structures emerge. So when we jump centuries, even a few thousand years ahead, and come to c.1000 - 1500, for large parts of the European Middle Ages we encounter a system of government characterized by relatively weak kings and a strong, hereditary land-owning blood nobility. As Ponting notes, this is what has come to be accepted as feudalism. It is taken as equivalent to decentralization. But in more or less the same time period, when we look at the Ottoman East, for example, we see relatively strong sultans coupled with the absence of hereditary land-owning blood nobility.

4. Power Configuration in Medieval Europe and Non-European States and Empires

The difference in power configuration in the fief-systems of Western Europe and the non-European states gives rise to a series of questions, and has attracted the attention of many thinkers throughout the Early Modern and Modern Eras. Why is this so? Why is there such a difference between Medieval Europe as the West and the Ottoman Empire (or China, or India) as the East? Is equating feudalism to the concrete visage of the European Middle Ages a satisfactory conceptualization? Could this concept be softened and broadened, in line with Ponting's suggestion, to include other fief-systems and fief-based states? Alternatively, if feudalism is only and only what existed in the European Middle Ages, what are we going to call (or how should we classify) roughly similar or comparable societies (in the Pontingian sense) outside Europe? Are they also feudal, or non-feudal? If non-feudal, what else can we call them? Can we give them an appropriate name of their own? Furthermore, can this question of feudalism vs. non-feudalism have had something to do with the subsequent emergence (or non-emergence) of capitalism? In other words, is there really a necessary connection between feudalism and capitalism? Was it because feudalism existed in Medieval Europe that capitalism was able to come out of it; alternatively, was it the absence of a fertile womb of feudalism in the East that prevented capitalism from being born? More crudely put, was there something in the "nature" of the East that served to block this transition from pre-modernity to capitalism or modernity?

These are some of the main questions or problems in this regard that have arisen and been debated at various times at least since Niccolo Machiavelli. Meeker notes that from the early-16th century, European observers had begun to perceive the Ottoman Empire as "a remarkable example of the centralism and exclusivity of sovereign power." (Meeker, 2002) What especially impacted on them, he says (following Inalcik's identification of Mehmed II as the true founder of the Ottoman Empire (Inalcik, 1973)) was the new imperial system that Mehmet developed after his conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Typical in this regard, he argues, is Machiavelli's 1515 comparison of the French and Ottoman governments of his time (Meeker, 2000):

The entire monarchy of the Turk is governed by one lord, the others are his servants; and, dividing his kingdom into sanjaks [sub-provinces], he send there different administrators, and shifts and changes them as he chooses. But the King of France is placed in the midst of an ancient body of lords, acknowledged by their own subjects, and beloved by them; they have their own prerogatives, nor can the king take these away except at his peril. Therefore, he who considers both of these two states will recognize great difficulties in seizing the state of the Turk, but, once it is conquered, great ease in holding it.

This is already a classical statement about the difference, striking at first sight, between the Ottomans' relative centralism and the relative decentralization of Medieval Europe. Since then, such debate has not been smoothly continuous, but has tended to peak at different points, with the way the question is put, as well as the answers given, tending to change over generations (Gellner, 1988).

5. Essentialist Eurocentrism Approach to Feudalism

What is striking in the debate on the relatively centralized Ottoman state and the relatively decentralized European one is the extent to which the contrast, as perceived at a certain point in time, for example in 1500 (re: the presence/absence of feudalism) or 1850 (re: the presence/absence of capitalism), has tended to be ascribed to a fundamental civilizational difference. It is this enduring supposition that, in line with other scholars' universalizing approaches, I am proposing to challenge by suggesting the possibility of an alternative, *historical* explanation -- that is to say, an explanation rooted not in the way essences have deterministically unfolded but in the way actual, concrete history has accidentally happened.

Yet this perspective was not there for a long time. Instead, from a very early date there was a tendency to look for a monocausal explanation. There had to be, so it was thought, an essential difference that was the great secret of history. This was taking place in a Eurocentric and strongly Orientalistic intellectual atmosphere. Furthermore, for a long time legal-political history was dominant. So from Machiavelli through Montesquieu to Hegel, a whole series of European thinkers sought for the answer in the political sphere. This led to the idea of Oriental Despotism. Already from the 16th to the 18th centuries, the West was said to have had (or developed) limited kingship, unlike the East, which was said to have Oriental Despotism (see Venturi, 1963 pp.134-142; Gellner, 1988). Subsequently, with the further development of an industrial capitalist market economy, attention began to shift from political to economic (and social) history. Economic explanations became widespread, and in this context it was Karl Marx who came up with a most comprehensive theory of economic determinism. Within his economic base and superstructures model, he tried to find an economic (capitalism-based) explanation for everything. He also applied the same logic to the East; there must have been something different about Oriental societies at the economic level that disabled capitalism. For Marx, this was what he called the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP).³ In the West,

³ This idea was initially and most comprehensively outlined in an unpublished work called *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (1857), also known as the *Formen*, which was part of much bigger manuscript (left as a manuscript) titled *Foundations of a Critique of Political Economy*, also known as the *Grundrisse* (1857-1861;

primitive communism (read: tribal society) had led to the slave mode of production, which had led to the feudal mode of production, out of which had come capitalism. In contrast, in the East primitive communism had evolved only a little into the Asiatic Mode of Production, which then lasted forever, causing stagnation and blockage (until the arrival of dynamic Western capitalism from the outside). So here, Marx was either substituting the AMP for Oriental Despotism, or putting the AMP as an economic base under the political superstructure of Oriental Despotism (O'Leary, 1989; Bhadra, 1989). But whether political or economic, it was still an essentialist approach.

After the 19th and early-20th centuries, there was a long interval before the 1960s and 70s, when all these AMP-vs.-feudalism debates came back into mainstream scholarship in a big way. There were several reasons for this. It was a time of decolonization and the search for national development on the part of newly independent Third World countries. This led to explorations in the historical origins of what had come to be called underdevelopment. Simultaneously, within Western Marxism, intellectual circles around the French and Italian Communist Parties were asking similar questions in an attempt to break away from what they regarded as Stalinist models of unilinear development. All this resulted in an explosion of fresh interest in what were broadly referred to as questions of imperialism, underdevelopment, and pre-capitalist modes of production. On the one hand, many anthologies were published on what Marx and Engels had said about the AMP, or the Orient in general (Bailey and Llobera, 1981). On the other hand, in circles of American, English, French and Italian Marxist historians and economists there took place a major debate about the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (so-called) (Hilton, 1976). This was triggered by a book written by the British Marxist economist Maurice Dobb called *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, (Dobb, 1946) which was reviewed by the American Marxist economist Paul Sweezy (1976). Dobb wrote a rejoinder: others came in, and suddenly, over the 1950s and the 60s there was a pile-up of article after article that created considerable excitement at the time, and may have inspired a few generations of young scholars taking their first steps in the social sciences to turn to history or historical sociology (see Hindess and Hirst, 1975; Haldon, 1993). The AMP debate was largely Orientalistic from the start, because people were building so much on Marx's authority. As for the Transition debate, it was neither explicitly about the East nor about East-West comparisons. Yet it was Eurocentric by implication, first because they were looking at the West all the time and debating just how it was that

published in German in 1939-1941; Eng. trans. by Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, 1973). For a separate edition of the former, see: Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, translated by Jack Cohen, with an Introduction by E. J. Hobsbawm (Lawrence and Wishart, 1965).

capitalism had happened in the West, whether it was through the role of big merchant capital or of small producers rising from the ranks to become industrialists. It was all supposed to be within the scope of Marxist theory.

What they missed (in fact, what the AMP theorists also missed) was the Euro-specific nature of the definition of feudalism that everybody was using. As previously indicated, like most other agrarian state-societies there had arisen a fief-system in Europe, too, with the first Germanic kingdoms in the Age of Migrations. Then over the next four or five centuries, it developed in a hereditary direction, which as Clive Ponting says was quite general with the Early Empires (Ponting, 2000). Hence by AD 1000 it acquired the decentralized, weak-kings-strong-fief-holders power configuration already mentioned. Then in the 19th century, European Medievalists, who knew only Europe and did not know anything else outside Europe, looked at its familiar face, together with all its concrete, specific, acquired traits, including the powerful hereditary landed nobility, and called all of it feudalism. Otherwise put, it was the specific Medieval power configuration, and not the basic fact of a fief-system, that was defined and identified as feudalism. This made it very difficult to find anything else that could be recognized and accepted as feudal in the same way. Instead, what happened was a very large category of non-feudalism that came to accompany and complement it. This was what Marx called the Asiatic Mode of Production. It wasn't really something in itself; it was a residue, catch-all, a by-product of Eurospecific feudalism. It was useless as a way of trying to escape Eurocentrism and Orientalism. For it was just as Eurocentric and Orientalistic as its supposed opposite, Euro-specific feudalism.

Is it possible to get rid of this trap? Is it possible to step outside the Western feudalism vs. Eastern non-feudalism (or AMP) dichotomy? Can both European feudalism, and together with it the Ottoman timar system, be reduced to their bare essentials? This can only be done by taking both the Medieval European and Ottoman power configurations, and marching them back to their origins. I would like to pose a double question about these political trajectories: If they both begin with the necessity to distribute land and create a fief-system, just how is it that in one (Medieval Europe) there emerges a weak-kings-strong-fief-holders kind of power configuration, while in the other, a strong-kings-weak-fief-holders kind of power configuration emerges? In the first case, after some time kings will be trying to recover the rights and prerogatives they have lost. This is an effort that stretches over several centuries. As Machiavelli already recognized, there were limits to how much they could encroach on the nobility's entrenched rights and privileges, and especially their hereditized private property (Meeker, 2000). Gradually they succeed in centralizing more and more, and this leads into what is called

Absolutism. This European Absolutism makes sense only against a background of European Feudalism (or the European type of feudal monarchy). Kings do become more powerful, and they do curtail, subdue and subordinate their nobilities. But they didn't, they could not, dispossess them (they cannot take away their lands which have become hereditary private property).

In the Ottoman Empire, in contrast, the struggle of the center, the sultan, is not to take away the excessive rights and privileges of his fief-holders but to prevent them from developing such rights in the first place -- i.e. to obstruct and delay those tendencies of privatization and hereditization that make such headway in Medieval Europe. So here, perhaps, we cannot say that Absolutism develops against Feudalism. In a sense, Ottoman Absolutism is there from an early stage. Perhaps this is what creates the essentialistic illusion of a timeless Oriental Despotism.

6. Conclusion

Be that as it may; my fundamental points are the following: (1) These two different kinds of power configurations of the Ottomans and the Europeans are not there from the start (whatever that start may be). Instead, once fief-distribution begins they develop and emerge over time. Furthermore, there is nothing in the general nature of a fief-based state that dictates only one possible development and none other. Hence they are historical accidents in the fullest sense of the word -- the outcome of complex, non-deterministic historical processes unfolding over several centuries.

(2) What European Medieval History specialists did in the course of the 19th century institutionalization and professionalization of History as an academic discipline may be described in the following way: They knew only one fief-system, which they saw only in the form of the power configuration it had eventually acquired. Hence they conflated the two. They made no methodological distinction between a fief-system in general, and the specific visage of the Medieval European power configuration. Hypothetically speaking, they could have detached the notion of a fief-system in general from its specifically Medieval European garb. They did not do that. It was as if they just took one still shot of the Middle Ages, and they called it feudalism. This meant that all the specific details of the Medieval European power configuration that we are familiar with, including a hereditary nobility, weak-kings-and-strong-fief-holders, relative decentralization, or contractual vassalage, were written into this notion of feudalism.

(3) This created a very narrow category of feudalism from the outset -- so narrow that if treated as a genus (to borrow a term from biology) it cannot possibly accommodate any species other than itself. So virtually by definition, it became extremely difficult to force other fief-systems arising elsewhere in the world into this category. Hence the Ottoman timar system, for example, comes to be regarded as non-feudal virtually by default because as a power configuration, it displays various characteristics that are different from the Medieval European power configuration.

(4) But the situation changes entirely if we treat the bare fact of a fief-system, or a fief-based state, as the genus, and all these or other (possible) power configuration outcomes as so many species. Whether Ottoman, or Seljuk, or Arabo-Islamic, or Chinese, or Mughal, or Byzantine, it is now possible to fit them all into this broad genus, along with European feudalism. This is not to say that they are all the same, but to say that they share a strong commonality at a higher level that overrides their (now admittedly secondary) differences.

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