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‘Rural inequality in sixteenth-century Ottoman Western Anatolia’

Inquiry into historical inequality is strongly linked with the broader debates of Great and Little Divergence. Yet, whether diverging trajectories of growth and change prior to industrialization were associated with different trajectories of change in the distribution of income and wealth has found little place in this recent literature. Perhaps the most important barrier before us is the lack of past data on distribution, and the literature is particularly weak for non-Western societies.

This article offers a quantitative analysis of rural income inequality in the Ottoman Empire, focusing on the Western Anatolian district of Manisa in the sixteenth century. For the first time, a methodology is developed to measure inequality between and within Ottoman direct producers’ and landlords’ classes during the classical period, based on data from fiscal surveys.

The sixteenth century Ottoman Anatolian countryside is particularly an interesting context to discuss whether pre-industrial trends in inequality should be understood as an extension of Malthusian mechanisms or as a matter of political economy. The Ottoman rural society and economy witnessed important transformations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which have been subject to a serious discord among historians who interpret these as a reflection of “population pressure”; and those who consider them to originate in the socio-political processes associated with market development, early modern state-building, and change in the warfare technology.

This paper addresses three questions: First, was the Ottoman rural society during the classical period a more egalitarian society than its European counterparts, as has been generally assumed until recently? Second, did the Ottoman Anatolia witness the sixteenth century upswing in inequality, observable across many places in Europe? Finally, can trends in rural inequality in the sixteenth century Ottoman rural society best be explained in terms of “population pressure” or as an outcome of the property rights institutions and the political choices of the central government?

To answer these questions, agricultural incomes of peasants and landlords in the Western Anatolian district of Manisa, are constructed based on fiscal surveys dating 1531 and 1575. The findings suggest by no means a low and stagnant level of inequality in the Ottoman rural society in the sixteenth century. Moreover, a rise in income inequality is observed from early to the late-sixteenth century.

At a first glance, the findings on the sixteenth-century Ottoman Anatolia seem to present a case supporting Milanovic’s argument that the Kuznets cycles replicate the Malthusian cycles: sixteenth century population growth leading to population pressure, a decline in per capita incomes, and higher inequality. However, how the decline in per capita agricultural output was translated in real incomes of different groups in the rural society was not a direct consequence of the population dynamics, but rather reflected a deliberate political choice of the central government, in favour of urban populations and big absentee lords, waqfs and private owners, and to the detriment of the peasantry, and small revenue holders –mainly cavalrymen- within the class of landlords.