



Structural Adjustment and Peasant Producers: The Political Economy of a Turkish Export Crop

Abstract

The Agricultural Reform Implementation Programme (ARIP), which was adopted under the aegis of a World Bank-financed Structural Adjustment Programme between 2001-2008, aimed to 'lock in' the neoliberal hegemony that had been developing in Turkey since the early 1980s by transforming the nation's agrarian political economy. For hazelnut-producing petty peasant groups of the Black Sea Region, this meant an overall restructuring of their relationship with both the state and (global) capitalist markets. This transformation is evident in the privatization of the parastatal sales cooperative Fiskobirlik and in the price pressures exerted by transnational corporations that purchase Turkey's vast hazelnut output. Faced with these changes, peasants launched a resistance movement against the implementation of ARIP.

The study investigates why the resistance of Black Sea peasants to the agricultural reform programme, and its eventual impact, remained limited. Contrary to studies focusing either on the state, the role of its agencies or on society, I adopt an approach that examines the interaction between state and society. In this framework, an agency-centred historical approach that uses quantitative and qualitative data shows that neither institutions nor individuals are determinants of the outcome of struggle. Both struggle and outcome are influenced by the wider structural logic of power relations inherent to the capitalist mode of production and the specificities of state-society relations – in this case of Turkey.

Peasant producers made extensive use of political coalitions with various social groups in their attempts to resist ARIP, forming a 'nationalist bloc' that demanded state intervention in the market mechanisms that determine the price of hazelnut. The coalition did achieve occasional successes, for instance by forcing the state to create an agency that set a subsidized purchasing price, and it was instrumental in confronting the neoliberal state project in Turkey. Nevertheless, the state's attempts to dominate the sales cooperatives continued even after its so-called retreat from the market. For instance, Fiskobirlik administration that strived to set a higher price on behalf of hazelnut producers during the reform, remains excluded from the hazelnut production process. Furthermore, the rise of the share of hazelnut producers in the unit export price proved to be temporary and peasant producers continue to be impoverished.

While farmer groups were adept at forming coalitions with various groups that opposed the neoliberal transformation of agriculture in Turkey in particular and Structural Adjustment Programmes in general, the analysis of social relations in villages shows that peasant producers are caught within dominant forms of political associations and remain far from becoming independent socio-economic and political actors.

Keywords: Peasant struggle, populism, Structural Adjustment Programmes, agricultural reform, state-society relations, Turkey.