The Politics of Indebtedness: The Dialectic of State Violence and Benevolence in Turkey

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School of Duke University

2017
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the interplay between sovereignty and governmentality in the domain of welfare provision in Turkey’s Kurdish southeast through the analytic of debt.

Debt lies at the heart of Turkish and Kurdish political identities in Turkey, but with a significant difference. For decades the Turkish state has exerted strong control over the economy and selectively distributed economic resources in favor of allegiant populations while dispossessing the unruly. This dynamic has given way to a common conception among the mainstream Turkish citizenry that allocation of economic resources is at the mercy of the state and citizens owe allegiance and obedience to the state for all that it bestows on them.

Although this debt morality pervades Turkey, it is interrupted and transformed in the Kurdish region. Considered the internal other of the Turkish nation and resisting ethnic homogenization and economic and political centralization policies for decades, Kurds have been subjected to systematic state violence and dispossession. This state violence and resistance to it have engendered a counter-debt morality in the Kurdish region, finding expression in the idiom bedel ödemek (paying the price). Foregrounding a history of state violence and dispossession rather than state benevolence, bedel reverses the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey, rendering the state indebted to the Kurds. Moreover, having emerged out of the Kurdish struggle, bedel redefines the Kurdish political identity around a new set of obligations: to stand up against the state for individual and collective self-determination and to pay tribute to those who made sacrifices in resisting the state.
This dissertation unpacks the political, economic and cultural logics of these two competing debt moralities and traces their contestation in the domain of welfare bureaucracy in an effort to demonstrate how struggles over sovereignty permeate governmental practices in the region.

My two years of ethnographic research (2012–2014) largely focused on the decision-making practices of local welfare officials, who enjoy an immense discretionary power in selecting beneficiaries. It showed that many officials’ practices were informed by the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey that promotes welfare as state benevolence and expects beneficiaries to repay their debt through allegiance and subservience. Although bedel leaks into welfare distribution—through the moral judgments of Kurdish officials—it works in the shadows, remaining largely silent and secret. This suppression of bedel, I suggest, bespeaks the state’s role in denying its own violence and asserting a unidirectional debt relation on beneficiary citizens. Illustrating how state-sponsored social welfare governance operates as a violent, debt-producing mechanism, the dissertation suggests that sovereign violence is intrinsic to the state’s governmental practices in the Kurdish region.

However, the domain of social welfare is not limited to the central state-sponsored social assistance programs. Over the years Kurdish movement has initiated its own welfare programs. Just as with centrally organized welfare programs, alleviation of poverty constitutes the main framework in which these initiatives operate. However, bedel plays a more overt role in these Kurdish initiatives’ approach to social welfare than it does in centrally organized public social assistance programs. This difference can be traced to the categories and vocabularies that municipality-led initiatives use as well as to their practices of beneficiary selection. The dissertation traces the ways in which
bedel is incorporated into the workings of Kurdish movement’s welfare programs and illustrates how this incorporation opens up room for the nurturing of resistant subjectivities and socialities that challenge the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey as well as the political and economic dispossession it entails. I thus argue that incorporation of bedel in Kurdish initiatives politicizes welfare and constitutes an obstacle to the Turkish state’s establishing and maintaining its sovereign power in the Kurdish region by means of welfare governance.

The dissertation contributes to broad theorizations of power and statecraft, redistribution and dispossession, and political conflict in the Middle East. These lines of inquiry have dominated social sciences for decades, but they have often remained separated. This disconnect obscures the close connections between governmental practices and the workings of sovereign power, preventing us from accounting for the moral and economic dynamics that inform political conflicts. I take debt as both an empirical object and an epistemological vantage point to bring these literatures together and offer different historical and ethnographic strategies of analyzing the state, political subjectivities and their conflictual construction.
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1. Introduction

“You will see the power of the Turkish Republic!” the man on the video yells with rage. “I know all of you! Whoever commits treason, whoever is a traitor will pay the price! All of you… All of you will get what you deserve! What the fuck has this state done to you? What did this state do to you? All of you… All of you will pay the price. You will see the power of the Turk! Ok? Don’t fucking look at me! All of you, look down!”

In August 2015, just a couple of weeks after the end of the peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, Kurdistan Workers Party), a video, recorded on a helmet cam, went viral on Turkish social media. It shows a group of Kurdish construction workers lined up face down with their hands cuffed behind their backs and surrounded by heavily armed Turkish special forces teams. In the video, we hear the words of the enraged commander: “You will see the power of the Turkish Republic!” Details of the incident were revealed soon after. Turkish Special Forces had raided a construction site in Hakkari, a Kurdish stronghold province neighboring Iraq and Iran. They took all workers into custody, beat them, and, before taking them to the station, the commander wanted to teach these Kurds a lesson—a lesson about the Turkish state and its power.

Following the release of the video, a huge debate erupted on Twitter and Facebook, making the commander’s words, “What did this state do to you?” (#Bu devlet size ne yapti), a trending topic. In response to this question, Kurds (along with some Alevi and Turkish leftists) listed all sorts of state violence exerted on them—from massacres to torture to arrests to forceful displacement and plunder—marking the state

1 To watch the video (Tri-Pin-a-tor1 2015), click this link: https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=6a6_1441831943#iijzEYvZ1wpSwPlub.99
the main source of many miseries. Many Turkish social media users, on the other hand, seemed to be sympathetic to the commander rather than to the Kurdish construction workers who were tortured by the police. They accused the Kurds of ungratefulness to the Turkish state, which, according to them, showed benevolence despite their defiance.

What did these people [Turks], this state, do to you? May you get no benefit from each bite you had (Mn 2015).

The state brought you service [hizmet], peace. What did you do in return? You stockpiled ammo and started a war against the state. You deserved this (Gazi 2015).

Free electricity, free water, child-money [conditional cash transfer provided by social assistance offices]. You live in wealth with the state’s money. And then you say you want justice (Muhsin 2015).

What did this state do to you? You asked for bread, it gave it to you. You asked for water, it gave it to you. But you shit where you ate (Turksoy 2015).

This dissertation takes its lead from two mundane questions in Turkey: why do many Turkish citizens ignore state violence even when it occurs plainly before their eyes, and why do Kurds refuse to see the widespread state endowments in the region as an act of goodwill? I examine these questions through the lens of debt. Debt provides us a window into the dialectic of state violence and benevolence; a window into the establishment of sovereign power through an articulation between these two discordant faces of the state. In Turkey, relations between the state and citizens center on debt that often manifests itself as a fearful gratefulness to the Turkish state, for its generous

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2 I borrowed the term “faces of the state” from Navaro-Yashin (2002).
endowments. However, in the Kurdish region, this debt logic is interrupted and transformed. Sometimes it takes the form of angry counter-debt claims that hold the state accountable for violence and plunder\(^3\). At other times, debt turns into an obligation to resist and pay tribute to those who resisted the state. This dissertation unpacks the political, economic and cultural logics of these debt moralities, specifically in the context of social welfare programs, in an effort to address how struggles over sovereignty permeates through governmental practices in the region.

Since the mid-1990s, state violence and benevolence have simultaneously manifested themselves through the expansion of welfare programs in the Kurdish region, in the shadow of a protracted armed conflict between the state and the PKK. These programs are promoted through the motto of “[The Turkish] Republic is foremost the benefactor of the poor/abandoned,” a motto that reflects a history of state benevolence in the country. The Turkish state has long redistributed resources in favor of certain select populations and citizens, making them owe the state allegiance and obedience (Üstel 2009, Yükseler 2010). This debt morality saturates everyday life in Turkey, finding expression in common idioms such as, “We all eat the bread of the state” and “May god be pleased with the state.” Scholars tend to account for this indebtedness through theories of patronage that emphasize the role of endowments in garnering popular support (Özbek 2002, 2009 Tuğal 2009, White 2002) or, similarly,

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\(^3\) In his M.A. thesis, Onur Gunay (2009) also points at the co-presence of incommensurable debt claims in Diyarbakir, Kurdistan. He identifies two major debt claims. The first centers on Kurds’ indebtedness to Turks for the violence they inflicted in the country, and the second emphasizes the Turkish state’s indebtedness to Kurds for its atrocities in the region. Whereas Gunay points at the central role of debt in the debates on the Kurdish conflict in the region, his analysis fails short in connecting these particular debt claims to the broader debt moralities in Turkey and Kurdistan, namely the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey that considers all citizens indebted to the state for its endowments, and the Kurdish multi-layered debt/obligation morality of bedel which includes but is not limited to the counter-debt claims on the state.

\(^4\) The saying “Cumhuriyet bilhassa kimsesizlerin kimsesidir” (emphasis mine) cannot be fully translated to English. The words kimsel and kimsesiz have meanings exceeding their literal counterparts in English (i.e. “someone” and “one who has no one,” respectively). Once used in the phrasal form the meaning shifts significantly. The phrase “kimsesizlerin kimsesi” may mean “the benefactor of the poor/abandoned” but also implies some sort of ownership or patronage relation as in “the holder of those who have no one.”
through a reciprocation of protection and gratitude (Babul 2015). However, a broader historical and ethnographic perspective complicates this picture, revealing the role of state violence and state-led dispossession in the making of the indebted citizen.

A constant threat of violence hangs above citizens in Turkey, punishing the unruly through various means from taking their lives and belongings to limiting their rights and freedom. The property they leave behind is often confiscated by the state to be redistributed (directly or indirectly) among the true, law-abiding citizens (“makbul vatandaş”) insofar as they continue to pledge allegiance to the state. What we see here is a dynamic that extends beyond mere gratitude or the garnering of consent through an exchange of benefits for loyalty and obedience. It is rather an imposition of a debt relation on citizens by the state: what the state bestows comes with an expectation of a particular return (allegiance and obedience) and those who fail to repay to the state become the objects of violence and dispossession. As such, debt becomes one of the main mechanisms through which the Turkish state maintains its sovereign power, in a back and forth between benevolent giving and violent taking.

This debt mechanism runs quite smoothly across Turkey, but the Kurdish region stands as an exception. Marked as the internal other of the Turkish nation, Kurds have been subjected to draconian state measures throughout their modern history, ranging from mass killings to forceful displacement to denial of their ethnic identity to expropriation of their property and systematic dispossession. The region has also been a central stage for resistance to the economic and political centralization and ethnic homogenization policies of the Turkish state. Whereas the state has rationalized its atrocities in the region as inevitable consequences of the “war on separatist terror,” the Kurdish political community adopted the term “bedel ödemek” (paying the price) to signify and mark their losses and also sacrifices they made in resisting state oppression.
Foregrounding histories of state violence and dispossession as well as resistance, bedel entails a multilayered debt–obligation relation—albeit one entirely different from the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey. Between Kurds and the state, bedel denotes anything the state took away, rendering the state indebted to them and reversing the hegemonic debt relationship between state and citizen. Moreover, with its emphasis on resistance against state oppression, bedel introduces new obligations among the Kurdish community: an obligation to risk exposure to state violence for collective and individual liberation and an obligation to pay tribute to those who made such sacrifices.

Just as indebtedness to the state constitutes the kernel of Turkish citizenship, bedel lies at the heart of contemporary Kurdish political identity in Turkey. “We paid the price,” many Kurds say in emphasizing their political stance against the Turkish state, in other words their Kurdishness. Only those who “paid the price” are considered to be properly Kurdish. As such, bedel appears as an expression of struggles over collective and individual self-determination for Kurds. In an effort to account for the intricate ways in which contestations over sovereignty and self-determination are waged in the region, this dissertation examines the tense interplay between the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey and the Kurdish bedel within the emergent domain of welfare governance. I suggest that moral struggles over debt – who is indebted to whom and on what grounds – are key to understanding the ways in which the state maintains its sovereign power in the Kurdish region and elsewhere.

1.1. The State, Sovereignty and Governmentality

Cizre, Kurdish region of Turkey, September 2015

Tens of thousands of inhabitants are leaving the town. Young and old, men and women crowd the streets and bus stations, with bags in their hands, not knowing when they will be able to return (Figure 1). A couple of days prior, government authorities
sent text messages to state employees—all civilian officials, teachers, healthcare personnel—ordering them to leave the town. Turkish military would declare a round-the-clock curfew, and staying would be synonymous with risking death.

Figure 1: Inhabitants leaving Cizre (www.haberaktuel.com 2015)

In September 2015, the Turkish state started a comprehensive military offensive against the Kurdish stronghold towns of Cizre, Sur, Silvan, Yüksekova, Şırnak, and Nusaybin. Two and a half years of peace negotiations between the state and the PKK were revoked in July 2015\(^5\). Against a possible military attack, Kurdish locals of these towns, especially the politicized youth organized under “Tevgera Ciwanen Welatparêz

\(^5\) The pro-Kurdish party Halkin Demokrasi Partisi (People’s Democracy Party; HDP) achieved an unprecedented success in the June 2015 national elections. The party won 13 percent of the votes and 80 of 550 seats in the Turkish Parliament. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the governing Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party; AKP) leaders did not take this result lightly, though. For the first time since its foundation in 2001, AKP had lost its majority in the parliament. Surveys indicated that AKP lost the support of its Turkish nationalist constituency in the western regions of the country and, in the Kurdish region, lost many votes (especially from devoted Kurdish Muslims) to HDP. AKP interpreted this failure as an outcome of the peace process. Nationalists had long considered peace negotiations as a concession to the “terrorists.” And Kurds had ascribed this peaceful atmosphere in the region to the Kurdish movement’s efforts instead of AKP’s goodwill. Choosing to appeal to the sensitivities of the nationalists, AKP shifted its stance on the Kurdish question to a belligerent one and ended the peace negotiations.
Yên Şoreşger” (Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement, or “Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi” in Turkish; YDG-H) had started to form self-defense units, built barricades, and dug trenches in the streets to create safe zones. Photographs and videos of young men and women waiting at barricades and trenches with Kalashnikovs, faces covered, circulated in news and social media. Taking these scenes as an immediate threat to state sovereignty, authorities pledged to wipe these “terrorists” off Turkish soil. Counterinsurgency discourse and strategies took hold in the country yet again, ruling out the language of peace and resolution. War was coming, and it would be waged in towns and cities this time rather than in mountains.

Curfew was the main tactic of the Turkish armed forces in this urban warfare. This seemingly less invasive restriction turned into a weapon of destruction in the hands of the Turkish state. Cizre became the first target and soon came the lockdown. All entrances and exits of the town were closed by the military. Nerve-wracking sounds of shells thrown one after another from military stations and tanks started to echo in the neighborhoods. Snipers were located on rooftops, ordered to shoot anything that moved. The remaining inhabitants were trapped in their homes. Those who stepped out became targets. But homes were not safe, either. Thousands of buildings were hit and demolished by bombs. Special forces, armed with heavy weapons and flamethrowers, raided each and every building, looking for “terrorists” and killing hundreds of civilians (İnsan Hakları Derneği 2016).

The military blockade lasted for seventy-nine days in Cizre. Soon it was expanded to other towns: Sur (103 days), Yüksekoval (78 days), Şırnak (65 days), Nusaybin (84 days), Silvan and Silopi for shorter periods. Curfews displaced millions, left the towns in ruins and hundreds of thousands homeless and destitute. From a military point of view, this was a victory in the “war on terror.” Once the blockade was
over, pictures of Turkish soldiers posing proudly in front of ruins began to circulate in national media. They had spray-painted the walls with slogans: “If you are a Turk, be proud. If not, obey!” “The state is everywhere. Girls, we are here. We will enter your caves.” “You will see Turk’s power” (Figures 2–4). In stark contrast to the gray ruins of the towns, red Turkish flags were hung on demolished buildings (Figure 5).

Figure 2: Graffiti by Turkish special forces: “If you are a Turk, be proud. If not, obey!” (Efe 2015)
Figure 3: Graffiti by Turkish special forces: “The state is everywhere. Girls, we are here. We will enter your caves.” (m.t24.com 2015)

Figure 4: Graffiti by Turkish special forces: “You will see Turk’s power.” (Turk Ozel Kuvvetler 2015)
Figure 5: The Kurdish town of Nusaybin after the 84-day military blockade. ([www.evrensel.net](http://www.evrensel.net) 2016)

Photos of Turkish soldiers helping the elderly or giving candy to kids in the streets and patting them on the head were also released by the army (Figure 6). The hearts of the Turkish governing elites were filled with fraternity/sorority, love, and compassion. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu organized Brotherhood Meetings (“Kardeşlik Mitingleri”) across the region and declared that the state would provide aid (“yardım”) to the victims of terror (“terror mağdurları”; Haberturk 2015). He kept his promise. In the Eid ul-Fitr following Ramadan, the state distributed “pocket money” (“bayram harçlığı”) to ten thousand families in the region ([www.ensonhaber.com](http://www.ensonhaber.com) 2016). AKP-associated municipalities, NGOs, and unions were also mobilized to extend a helping hand to those who had suffered from “terror.” The president’s wife, Emine Erdoğan, and the prime minister’s wife, Sare Davutoğlu, made a substantial donation to the Path of Love (“Şevgi Yolu”) campaign, initiated by Türk İşkadınları Derneği (Turkish Businesswomen’s Association; TIKAD). In their speeches during the festive fundraising event of the campaign, both Mrs. Erdoğan and Mrs. Davutoğlu emphasized the importance of generosity in the war on terror. “As you know, Turkey is the most
generous country in the world,” Mrs. Erdoğan began. She continued: “In the past thirty-five years, we lost more than forty thousand people to the terror. Many families suffered. Many orphans and widows were left behind. We cannot give them their loved ones back. But we can relieve their pain. We can prepare a better future for their children. Now it is time to mobilize for them. It is time to put love into action” (www.haberler.com 2016; my translation).

Figure 6: A Turkish soldier pats a Kurdish child’s head in Sur, Diyarbakir, after the military blockade.

The violent state was not absent from these scenes of compassion and love, though. Turkish special police forces (“Polis Özel Harekat”; PÖH) had done their share to “put love into action” in the Kurdish region. They released their photographs taken in front of the walls of ruined buildings, invaded houses and bedrooms that they had spray painted with the slogan “Love is lived in the cellar, darling” (“Aşk bodrumda yaşanıyor güzelim”; Figure 7) – a slogan which clearly referred to the basement massacre they
committed in Cizre on February 7, 2016 where 150 civilians paid the price of disobeying the state’s orders by being burnt alive (Reuters 2016, Deutche Welle 2016).

Figure 7: Graffiti by Turkish special forces: “Love is lived in the cellar, darling” (www.haberiyakala.com 2016)

The coupling of violence and benevolence represents an age-old paradox inherent to sovereign power. If taking lives through crude violence, or the capacity to do so, has been one aspect of performing and maintaining supreme authority over territory (Schmitt 1985, Agamben 1998), engaging in benevolent giving has also been intrinsic to sovereignty (Bataille [1988] 1991, Grant 2009, Karatani 2014). These seemingly contradictory aspects of sovereign power often go hand in hand, and the Turkish state has been no exception in this regard. Throughout the history of the Republic, two discordant faces of the state—brutal and benevolent—have accompanied each other and often intertwined in pernicious ways. It is such immanent discord and whimsical arbitrariness, which mark most contemporary democracies, that render the state enigmatic, maddening, and difficult to study (Abrams 1988, Aretxaga 2003).
It is tempting for the critical theorist to explain away the state’s benevolence cynically as little more than a counterinsurgency or warfare strategy, purposefully designed by the center to contain potentially insubordinate populations and garner the consent of masses for the state’s aggressive sovereign practices. For instance, in their works tracing the longue durée history of state development in Europe, Charles Tilly (1988) and William McNeill (1982) point out the relationship between warfare and welfare and suggest that the expansion of employment-based social policies between the 1940s and 1980s was an effort on the part of the state to contain and gain the patriotic support of working classes whose increased bargaining power could not be suppressed or mobilized for war merely by coercion. Similarly, Beverly Silver (2004), in her study of the Great America Program in the United States during the Vietnam War, argues that capital-intensive warfare pushed the states to expand welfare and social rights for citizens to prevent domestic unrest and vulnerability.

Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward’s classic work, *Regulating the Poor* ([1971] 1993), is exemplary of arguments about welfare’s deployment as a counterinsurgency strategy at the dawn of the neoliberal era. Focusing on the function of welfare in the United States between the 1960s and 1990s, Fox Piven and Cloward correlate the expansion of income-based welfare programs with the peaking of racial and underclass insurgencies. They show that, in times of social turmoil in the United States, poverty relief programs expanded and then contracted when the turmoil subsided. They thus argue that the main rationale underlying the expansion of welfare is not to meet social need but to pacify social unrest. Following Fox Piven and Cloward, many scholars have explored the function of welfare, especially in relation to social disorder (Hicks and Swank 1981, Fording 2001, Isaac and Kelly 1981, Jennings 1983, Schram and Turbett 1983). More recently, sociologist Erdem Yoruk (2012) applied this
framework to the case of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. Through a rigorous statistical analysis, he shows that there is a strong positive correlation between the state’s welfare endowments and Kurdish ethnicity across the country. Linking his findings to the Kurdish mobilization and uprisings since the 1980s, Yoruk concludes that state-sponsored welfare in Turkey operates as the carrot side of the state’s counterinsurgency logic, a logic which associates Kurdish unrest with economic factors such as underdevelopment and pervasive deprivation in the region, hence seeking to hinder the Kurdish popular support for the PKK through the provision of welfare endowments to underclass Kurds.

Notwithstanding the discursive and political appeal of such reasoning about the containment function of welfare in the contexts of war and social turmoil, it nonetheless is prone to epistemological problems as it assumes—and has yet to prove—the presence of a hidden unified intentionality inherent in the state, as if there were a master plan that had generated the state’s contradictory faces. Secondly, whereas these works point out the relationship between state violence and benevolence, they consider these inherently incommensurable or of a different nature (as in stick and carrot). Looked at in this way, welfare appears as a domain devoid of coercion, complementing containment strategies of the state only by persuasion and demonstrating generosity. Within these frameworks, the violence inherent to benevolence – a dynamic which, I argue, is central to the maintenance of sovereign power – remains invisible. Finally, these studies’ exclusive focus on policy making processes prevents them from exploring the implementation and effects of these policies on the ground where lower-level officials – with their diverse experiences and politico-moral stances – enjoy an immense discretionary power. By ignoring what happens at “the margins of the state” (Das and Poole 2004), these functionalist analyses present a too neat picture that falls short in accounting for the
possible contestations and conflicts within state space (those beyond policy-making circles) and fail to explain how hegemony building efforts of the political elite are enhanced or disrupted in the everyday workings of state bureaucracy.

Alternatively, some theorists have productively proposed that one may attempt to circumvent such problems and still analyze the state in its mysterious complexity by focusing on manifold technologies of power and their effects rather than a hidden center, intentions and essential functions (Foucault 1991, Mitchell 1999, Rose 1996). Inspired by these works, many anthropologists have developed a keen interest in the questions of “what is the state,” “where is the state” and “how to study the state,” and embraced “a disaggregated view of the state that shows the multilayered, pluri-centered and fluid nature of this ensemble that congeals different contradictions” (Sharma and Gupta 2006: 10). These analyses largely focus on everyday practices and representations of the state: its construction, the ways in which it is enacted (mainly culturally), how it is perceived and how the boundaries between the state and society are drawn. Despite some exceptions which draw on theories and concepts of ideology, fantasy, fetish, ritual, fiction, magic and affect (Allison 1991, Aretxaga 2003, Das 2004, Herzfeld 1992, Navaro-Yashin 2002, 2006, 2007, 2012, Stoler 2007, Taussig 1992), much of the anthropology of the state frames analyses around the Foucauldian concept of “governmentality” (Foucault 1991) or “government of conduct” – of the self, family, institutions and so on. This literature examines the state as a cumulative effect of multiple and sometimes discordant modalities of power which operate through various institutions, discourses and tactics and configure habits, aspirations and beliefs toward achieving certain goals (Brin Hyatt 1997, Chatterjee 2004, Harvey 2005, Gupta 1995, 2001, 2012, Gupta and Ferguson 2002, Martin 1997, Nustad 2005, Petryna 2002. Roitman 2004, Sharma 2008, 2001).
Indeed, these works usefully account for the co-presence of contradictory manifestations of the state as they acknowledge the productivity of power and contingencies involved in the emergence of its multifarious modalities. Nonetheless, they deploy the Foucauldian framework of governmentality such that state power appears so diffuse. In so doing, they tend to overvalue and totalize the effects of the state and marginalize resistance and contestations that inform the representations and everyday workings of the state. This result is an obfuscation of the initial promise of deconstructing the unified and overarching conception of the state and demystifying its enigma. Moreover, inheriting one of the major limits of governmentality, that is its ruling violence out of the picture (Li 2007), these anthropological works fall short in accounting for the draconian face of the state which is still in effect alongside governmental practices that are apparently geared toward improving the well-being of the population.

This final oversight in the literature has been addressed by scholars who focus on practices of modern states to maintain control over territory and the population mainly by force such as checkpoints (Jeganathan 2004, Peteet 2017), mass displacement (Ferme 2004, Malkki 1995, Sanford 2004), crime control (Siegel 1998), and war (Nelson 1999, 2009, Sluka 2000, Warren 1993). Bringing sovereignty back into the study of the state, these anthropological works shed light on how the state is produced and reproduced by everyday mechanisms of coercion. However, this anthropological literature on state violence and sovereignty has rarely been in direct conversation with the operations of governmentality.

Examining the state through debt – which is one of the central tropes in the production of “truth regimes” (Foucault 2010: 18,20) in Turkey and the Kurdish region

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as well as in the cultural figurations of Turkish and Kurdish political identities – my work draws on and brings together understandings of sovereign power and governmentality. I suggest that rather than focusing on one or the other of these frameworks, debt as an analytical and ethnographic category is a critical way through which the articulation between disaggregated practices of the Turkish state can be understood.

1.2. Debt and Obligation: The Politics of Giving and Taking

“We are very careful in selecting beneficiaries, you know?” Mithat was proudly explaining the mechanisms of beneficiary selection to me while sitting in the back seat of a police car on our way to applicants’ homes for an on-site investigation. Mithat was an official working for the Şenyurt social assistance office, located near one of the Kurdish slums of Istanbul. “We pay the utmost attention to avoid providing state assistance to the undeserving ones. [Working in] This neighborhood is particularly difficult, though. Do you see this graffiti on the wall?” as he pointed at almost illegible scribbles on the buildings: “Apo,” “PKK is people. People are here.” He continued: “We investigate all applicants from this neighborhood. And with the help of them [this time, pointing at the police officer driving the police car we were in], we are able to identify each of them. And by no means do we give them social assistance. By no means do we allow the undeserving to get a share from the state’s [public] resources.”

During the past couple of weeks in the Şenyurt welfare office, I had already found that police were an integral part of the beneficiary selection process. Not only did the police accompany welfare officials on their visits to such “dangerous” neighborhoods, but also helped Mithat and others select “deserving” beneficiaries. They

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7 Apo is the name that the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan is usually called by Kurdish people
crosschecked potentially suspect applicants’ files with their records which involve intelligence about the applicants’ and their family members’ political affiliations and sympathies. Those who failed this background check were deprived of endowments and also became economically indebted to the state as they had to pay mandatory General Health-Care Insurance (“Genel Sağlık Sigortası,” GSS) premiums that would have otherwise been paid by the state on their behalf. But the story of debt and its violence in welfare governance does not end here. It is not limited to the imposition of economic debt on those “undeserving,” “ungrateful.” Those poor who passed this investigation were granted welfare endowments, becoming a subject to the Turkish state’s benevolence. But this benevolence came with a price. It bore another – political – debt: beneficiaries should continue to pledge allegiance and demonstrate subservience to the state. For Kurds, paying this political debt entailed violence as it forced them to break their ties with the Kurdish political community, to deny their political identity and to forget their history.

Debt is a particular relationship that is based on a power imbalance between the creditor and debtor. Debt emerges when the former gives something to the latter in return for a future repayment. Although such belated repayment also marks other forms of exchange, such as the gift (Mauss [1924] 2010, Gregory 1982, Strathern 1988, Weiner 1992), what differentiates debt is the capacity of the creditor to determine the form of repayment and impose sanctions on the receiving party to make sure the debt is paid (Lazzarato 2012). Hence, a certain authoritarian morality marks debt relations—as in the common maxim “debts shall be paid” (Graeber 2011)—and imbues debtors with fear, guilt and a sense of duty (Nietzsche 2013).

There is an additional, unaddressed, moral dimension of debt however: it imagines credit as a benevolent or generous act. Credit is “granted” to those who need
it, often desperately. Potential debtors make a request or are offered credit, for which the granting is always contingent on the will of the creditor. It is this will to grant that gives debt relation its moral character. Debt’s temporal reference is always this “initial” giving/granting. As such, it writes and rewrites history from the perspective of the creditor – an act which denies histories of appropriation, or what Marx (1990) calls in a different context, “primitive accumulation,” rendering the creditor economically, politically, and morally superior.

This is all the more so in the case of the state’s seemingly free provisioning, like social assistance handouts in Turkey. These provisions are easily confused with “pure gifts” (Sahlins [1974] 2004), as if this is an act of generosity imposing no requirement of repayment. Deserving citizens are given money, food, clothing, and healthcare benefits—a tiny share of the so-called “bread of the state.” Constant reference to these moments of endowment precludes prior histories of forceful taking, presents the state as the original donor, and renders recipient citizens indebted to the state. While there may be no expectation of repayment to the state in financial or material terms, the silence around such repayment often engenders a more pervasive debt relation between the state and beneficiary-citizens. Here, debts can take on non-material forms (allegiance/subservience) of which repayment is by no means left to chance or the will of the recipients. Local welfare bureaucracies work to ensure that these debts are paid to the state in the form of loyalty and obedience, the interpretation of which is left to the officials’ discretion and may take manifold forms, ranging from accepting one’s destiny to not asking too much of the state to demonstrating shame to not engaging in oppositional political activities. Supervision of this repayment with scrutiny in every aspect of life subjects recipients to fear and precariousness. As such, debt is an oppressive mechanism that is intrinsic to the state’s sovereign and governmental
practices in Turkey. With its oscillation between benevolent giving and violent taking, debt is one of the main mechanisms through which loyal and subservient Turkish citizens are produced.

While this debt mechanism largely succeeds in Turkey, in the Kurdish region it encounters a strong resistance. The Kurdish region is full of witty stories about people challenging the predominant debt morality in Turkey. As one such story goes, one day, a government official from Diyarbakir Public Power Administration stops by a poor house to read the electric meter. Seeing the figure on the meter, he notices an oddity. The meter shows a negative amount of electricity usage for the month, meaning that if he calculates the bill accordingly, the power administration is supposed to pay to the household, not the other way around. Knowing that such an outcome is impossible unless the household fiddled with the meter, the official knocks on the door. An old woman appears. Instead of immediately accusing the woman of fraud, the official decides to handle the issue by cracking a joke. “Auntie,” he says, “the meter says the state owes you.” Rather than taking an apologetic position, the auntie takes the bull by its horns. She grabs the official’s arms, looks into his eyes, and says, “My son, then the state should pay its debt!8”

What makes the situation of the Kurdish region peculiar is that the dialectic of sovereign violence and benevolence has long been quite manifest in the region. On the one hand, the majority of the region’s inhabitants have been systematically subjected to crude state violence and state-led dispossession. And on the other hand, the Turkish state has made investments and endowments in the region, such as dams, State Economic Enterprises (“Kamu Iktisadi Teşekülleri,” or KITs) and welfare programs.

8 A slightly different version of this story is told by Sirri Sureyya Onder in Sarmasik Dernegi’s booklet Mazxana (Sarmasik 2011).
Witnessing these two discordant faces of the state simultaneously for decades, many Kurds have acquired a perspective into the workings of sovereign power in Turkey – a perspective that leads them see the intimate connection between state generosity and violence in ways that are not necessarily visible within the larger nation-state. The state may have built the necessary infrastructure (dams) to provide electricity for the region – an investment which is promoted as an evidence of the state’s will to improve. However, for many Kurds, the dams did more harm than good. They submerged fertile lands, villages and historical and sacred sites and were deployed as a part of counterinsurgency strategy (barrier to guerrilla activity), thus economically, culturally and politically dispossessing the Kurdish population of autonomy. For these reasons – and many like them – most Kurds not only deny indebtedness to the state for its endowments, but also claim a repayment for its violence, plunder and dispossession. Unapologetically, like the auntie in the joke, they claim that “the state should pay its debt!”

This counter-debt relationship in the Kurdish region finds expression in “bedel ödemek” (paying the price). However, bedel is not simply an idiom that operates on a purely discursive level. It has a material and corporeal presence in the region. Bedel materializes in burned-down houses, villages and towns, and in lost homeland, youth, life prospects and opportunities, making salient the destructive effects of the state’s presence. For Kurds, those prices paid become evidence against the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey, a morality which promotes the state as a benevolent patron, hence entailing claims that citizens owe allegiance and obedience to the state for its generous endowments.

But bedel goes well beyond counteracting the hegemonic Turkish debt morality. It also introduces new sets of obligations in the Kurdish political community. Born out of
a struggle over sovereignty and self-determination in the Kurdish region, bedel is also personified in the bodies of Kurdish martyrs, guerillas and political prisoners, who are believed to risk their lives, freedom and comfort for the liberation of all. This voluntary giving obligates others in multiple ways, which include the acknowledgment of these martyrs as sacrifice, obligating all others to pay tribute to them by furthering their cause. It is through the power of bedel – a power akin to that of the gift⁹ – resistant socialities and subjectivities are nurtured in the Kurdish region. These socialities and subjectivities constitute an obstacle to the state’s maintenance of its sovereignty in the region through benevolent-violent mechanisms of debt which are intrinsic to welfare governance. This dissertation traces the moments these resistant socialities intervene in the domain of welfare in the Kurdish region and explores what kinds of alternatives these interventions open up for subaltern Kurds.

1.3. Moral Economy

When I first started my fieldwork in the summer of 2012 in Diyarbakır, the unofficial capital of Kurds, my biggest challenge was to answer the expected question, “So what do you work on?”—a question that followed almost each new acquaintance. I remember the puzzled looks on people’s faces when I told them I was working on the moral economies of Turkish citizenship and bedel. Perhaps this confusion had something to do with my own incapacity, as a junior researcher, to clearly explain my project without using the help of academic jargon (i.e., without name- or concept-

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⁹ Theorists of the gift clearly demonstrate the significance of obligation – the triadic obligations to give, to receive and to reciprocate – in the formation of social relations (Mauss [1924] 2010, Malinowsky [1922] 1984, Gregory 1982, Strathern 1988, Weiner 1992, Sahlins [1974] 2004, Piot 1999, Graeber 2012). Whereas these works address competitive aspects of gift exchange (as in Potlatch), much work in this literature left violence out of the picture in examining the gift and its obligations. Bedel, with its obligation to give (make sacrifices in resisting state violence), to receive (recognize such sacrifices as gifts to the community) and to return (pay tribute to those who made sacrifices and also risk state violence for individual and collective liberation), offers us a new perspective into connections between violence, sovereignty and the gift, helping us account for the role of obligation in the formation of resistant socialities in conflict-ridden contexts.
dropping). However, the questions and discussions leading these conversations showed that there was something more to this confusion, something beyond my unintended pretentiousness, something more about the term “moral economy.”

Many of my non-academic acquaintances found the term somewhat weird, if not oxymoronic. “After all,” I was asked “what does morality have to do with economy?” Economy, as many understood it, was an amoral domain ruled by the almost-natural laws of supply and demand, if not an immoral one regulated by instinctually self-seeking individuals’ pursuit of more and more profit (Elyachar 2005). Wouldn’t it be in vain to research morality in economy, something that just does not exist?

Others with social sciences or humanities backgrounds did not question the concept of moral economy itself. They knew that economic relations that are based on market rationality necessitated a shift in moral discourse as well as in the organization of social relations, both of which run counter to the “premodern, pre-capitalist” moral cosmologies. And yet they still raised doubts about the applicability of the concept of moral economy to modern capitalist, highly bureaucratized contexts, such as my field. Indeed, the two most renowned scholars of moral economy, historian E. P. Thompson (1964, 1971) and anthropologist James Scott (1976), used the concept with reference to some traditional/primordial ties and customs that informed relations of reciprocity in pre-capitalist, pre-free market settings. Approaching moral economy as such, the critiques that questioned the applicability of the concept to my research had a point. Unlike Thompson and Scott who worked on moral economy in “pre-capitalist” contexts, I was working on issues—the Turkish state, social policy, bedel, and the Kurdish struggle—which emerged in the modern, capitalist world. So how would I research moral economy in such settings?
I had a chance to further discuss these issues with my fiercest critics: those from the leftist and Kurdish circles in Turkey. As good readers of Marx and Lenin, they did not much question the possibility of alternative economic relations that operate on grounds other than the maxims of neoclassical economics. In fact, believing that contradictions inherent to capitalism would inevitably lead to its dissolution, they strove for a more humane, egalitarian, and communal socioeconomic basis, where commodification of labor, private property, exploitation, colonialism, imperialism, and the state would eventually wither away. In other words, they believed in the possibility of modern, alternative, non-capitalist forms of economy, morality, politics, and sociality—overdetermining (Althusser 1971) one another in the very process of their emergence. And yet, they were still quite critical of me when I brought up the issue of the moral economy of Turkish citizenship and bedel.

Most of them, especially those from the Kurdish movement, were highly critical of the circulation of bedel in everyday economic life in the region. To them, referring to losses and sacrifices that were made for the Kurdish struggle in the sphere of economic exchange might have very dangerous effects. It involved a risk of spoiling the very moral base of the Kurdish society as it might lead to the commodification of sacrifices and the (political/revolutionary) labor they entail, stripping them of their unique political value and rendering them quantifiable, comparable and exchangeable with money and other material gains. So, maybe I was wrong in thinking that moral economy of bedel constituted a challenge to the hegemonic debt morality and neoliberal economic rationales in Turkey.

I am grateful to my critics for ruthlessly encouraging me to think on the potential pitfalls of my project. Notwithstanding the merits of all these invaluable critiques and questions, throughout this dissertation I will insist on my conceptual apparatus, which, I
believe, will help me better elucidate the dynamics informing political, economic, and moral aspects of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. In so doing, I follow the footsteps of Thompson (1964, 1971), who first coined the term “moral economy” in his work on the eighteenth-century food riots in England. Writing against crass economic reductionist analyses of food riots, which draw a direct causal link between food scarcity and protests, Thompson emphasizes the significance of traditional rights or customs in the emergence and spread of uprisings. He details how the poor drew on these traditional rights and customs that were derived from the paternalist model of the marketing and manufacturing processes in their resistance to the free-market model of food sales, especially in times of scarcity. It is this community consensus built around traditional customs, values, and actions that Thompson called the moral economy of the English working class (Randall et.al. 2000).

Although my use of moral economy in this dissertation resembles that of Thompson’s, at the same time, it diverges from Thompson’s framework in two significant ways. Histories and stories told in this dissertation demonstrate the significance of an extra-economic, or moral, dimension that comes into play in the formation of socioeconomic relationships between the Turkish state and its Turkish and Kurdish citizens. Nonetheless, this moral dimension is by no means a static one, a constant bundle of values, customs, or traditions, uninterruptedly transferred from one generation to another. On the contrary, moral economic claims are constantly shaped and reshaped through interplay among various actors and forces that operate at multiple scales. In this regard my use of moral economy depicts a more dynamic picture than that of Thompson’s, especially because it demonstrates the negotiations and conflicts over the relationship between the state and its citizens and also among the various segments of Kurdish society.
Moreover, unlike Thompson, I do not limit my analysis to the oppressed or marginalized classes, as if morality is a domain that enables only them to justify their stances and claims or push their demands. As a growing literature on the anthropology of morality (Fassin 2005, 2012, Roitman 2005, Ticktin 2006, Muechlebach 2007) and my ethnographic data illustrate, morality is also intrinsic to the discourses and practices of those who hold the power. It is in this regard that, instead of associating moral economy exclusively with one class or social group (working class, peasants, the poor), I suggest approaching moral economy as a field of struggle, where multiple actors with diverse politico-economic agendas, interests, and claims vie with one another. In other words, I believe in the importance of incorporating politics—specifically, power dynamics and contestations—into the analysis of moral economy. I thus show that, especially in highly politicized and contested places like the Kurdish region, where there are multiple registers of power (the Turkish state, the PKK, Kurdish movement, municipalities and so on), a struggle over the appropriation of morals in making socio-economic claims is at the same time a political struggle over sovereignty.

1.4. Locating the Kurdish Region in Anthropology

Kurds and Kurdistan occupy a marginal place in anthropology. Lack of interest in the Kurdish people and the region in the discipline could be explained by various factors such as the provincialization of the Middle East in anthropology and the uncertainty regarding the geographical and cultural boundaries of the Middle East\(^\text{10}\) (Abu-Lughod 1989; Altorki 2015, Deeb and Winegar 2012, Kandiyoti 2015, Suad

\(^{10}\) The Middle East is a region whose geographical boundaries have long been contested. For instance, the question of whether Turkey – a country which is located at the crossroads between Europe and Asia and has sought to situate itself as a European country at least since the late-19\(^{th}\) century – is in the Middle East is still a disputed one. Today, the Anthropology of the Middle East is mostly dominated by works on Arab majority societies with a topical focus on Islam, Islam and gender, ethnic and religious conflict. Although
2015); intense political conflicts which have made it almost impossible to do ethnographic fieldwork in Kurdistan (Leach [1940] 2006); and a broader public inattention to the region and its peoples, especially in the Global North. Until recently, many in the world had not even heard of Kurds or Kurdistan. Political developments following the Second Gulf War, specifically the foundation of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq in 1992, made Kurdish populations recognizable to a Western political audience. However, it was not until the break of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the emergence of the Democratic Union Party (“Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat,” or PYD) and its armed wing the People’s and Women’s Protection Units (“Yekîneyên Paratiya Gel/Jin,” YPG/J) as the main force against the ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), that Kurds and Kurdistan found a place in the political imaginary and vocabulary of people across the world.

Constituting the largest stateless people in the Middle East, Kurds and Kurdistan have long been at the center of contentions over sovereignty. Nonetheless, having been erased from world maps after World War I and divided between four nation states (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey), Kurds have been politically, economically and socially marginalized and Kurdistan’s boundaries remain contested. In the Kurdish region of Turkey (or Northern Kurdistan, called “Bakur” by Kurds), the Turkish state denies the very existence of Kurds as an ethnic group that is separate from Turks, let alone acknowledging the presence of a region called Kurdistan. This renders it particularly difficult to do research in this region.

Kurds have always been considered an integral part of the region, anthropologists of the Middle East rarely showed a keen interest in them.
This is not to say that the region and its people have been totally left out of the scope of ethnographic inquiry. Since the late-Ottoman and early republican times, various state appointed “researchers” (mainly military personnel and bureaucrats) have conducted extensive field research on the social, political and economic organization of Kurds as well as their languages and cultures. The Turkish state has made extensive use of this information in designing its military offensives and assimilation policies, including but not limited to demographic measures such as relocation of the population, establishment of education institutions, and building alliances with potentially loyal Kurdish tribes and notables (Bayrak 2009). The publicization of this data took a different route, still geared toward assimilation but one that sought to achieve this aim by erasing the difference between Kurds and Turks, in favor of the latter. Much pseudo-scientific work published in Turkey on “Eastern Turkey” argue for the essentially Turkic character of Kurds and the Kurdish language, often through unsubstantiated theories, presenting Kurds as “primitive” or “uncivilized” Turks \(^\text{11}\) (Bayrak 2009). Combined with another strong strand of literature which examines the Kurdish question in Turkey through the framework of terror and terrorism (Bal 1999, Bal and Laciner 2004, Ekici 2010, Ker-Lindsay and Cameron 2009, Ünal 2012, Turkey Dışişleri Bakanlığı 1998, 1999), these studies have provided a pseudo-scientific ground for the hegemonic denialist nationalist ideology that informs the mainstream Turkish perception of Kurds as backward “bandits,” “reactionaries,” “traitors” and “terrorists” for no good reason (Yegen 1996).

Yet some scholars have sought to produce knowledge about the Kurds and Kurdistan beyond the grip of nationalist ideologies. In addition to some early

\(^{11}\) One of the most renowned of these theories is that Kurds are in fact mountain Turks. They came to be known as Kurds because while walking on snowy mountains, they made the sounds “kart, kurt” which they got associated with over time.
ethnographic accounts on the region (Leach [1940] 2006, Barth 1953, 1954, Minorsky 1968, Yalcin-Heckman 1990, 2002), a literature on the history of Kurds has also flourished since the early 1990s (Chaliand et.al. 1980, McDowall [1991] 2003, Izady 1992). These seminal works constitute a challenge to the nation-states’ efforts to erase the Kurds and their history. Nonetheless, the functionalist approach of early ethnographic works, with their particular focus on its “internal” dynamics of Kurdish society and social function of each institution (such as tribal organizations, feuds, hospitality, cross-cousin marriage and so on), has produced a legacy within ethnographic frameworks of a static society, preventing analyses of the significant shifts in Kurdish society and identity vis-à-vis “external” national, regional and global dynamics. By expanding the geographical and temporal scope of inquiry, historical works on the Kurds overcame parochialism to a certain extent and shed further light on broader dynamics that informed the formation of Kurdish identity and society. However, this literature is mainly dominated by ethnicist and constructivist approaches, either deriving Kurdish national identity from a uniform ethnic origin ever-present in history or reducing it to a mythical origin constructed by capitalism and modernism (Vali 2003: 66). As such, most early ethnographic and historical work on Kurdistan often falls into traps of essentialism and/or historicism, which obfuscate the dynamic, relational aspects of sociality and identity formation.

Some scholars have addressed this question of relationality, providing a window into tense power dynamics that are indispensable to a study of statecraft, nation formation and political identity in the Kurdish region and in the Middle East in general—a region marked by ages-long struggles between neighboring communities over sovereignty. Martin van Bruinessen’s classic work, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (1992) is a good example in this regard. Based on his
fieldwork in Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan between 1973-1975, van Bruinessen examines the formation of primordial loyalties in Kurdish society, mainly tribal allegiances to aghas (Kurdish chiefs) and religious allegiances to Shaikhs (Kurdish religious leaders). The book’s functionalist tendencies are apparent, especially in van Bruinessen’s identification of his main problematic - that is, “internal” socio-political structures of the Kurdish society. However, the book successfully escapes some of the pitfalls of functionalist analysis, such as parochialism and the inability to explain change by bringing the question of the state into its analysis. Tracing shifting relations between the Ottoman and Turkish states and Kurdish notables, van Bruinessen offers a more dynamic analysis of what he calls “primordial structures.” Instead of taking tribal loyalties to aghas or religious allegiances to Shaikhs for granted, as essential characteristics of Kurdish society, he shows how these structures arose and were strengthened with the enhanced penetration of the states into the region. However, van Bruinessen’s analysis is mostly limited to the relations between the state authorities and local Kurdish notables, falling short in providing a vivid account of everyday life that might detail the positions, sensibilities, perspectives and struggles of ordinary people. Nonetheless, his focus on the role of power dynamics and politico-economic alliances or contentions among differently situated actors points at the relational aspects of political identity as informed by struggles over sovereignty.

This latter point on sovereignty is particularly emphasized by Abbas Vali, a Kurdish political scientist who specializes on the formation of Kurdish national identities in Iran and Turkey. In order to avoid totally ethnicizing, hence essentializing Kurdish political identity or, adversely, trivializing it as a socially constructed myth, Vali suggests taking the question of sovereignty seriously and explores how Kurdishness is constituted in a changing relationship with other national identities, existing or
emergent in the region. In his essays (1998, 2003), Vali points at the fragmented character of Kurdish political identity - that is Kurdishness as defined and expressed differentially in different parts of Kurdistan, ruled by Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian states. One common feature of these four nation-states is that their sovereign rule is based on a strong denial of Kurdish identity (albeit this denial takes a different form in each state). Similarly, what is common to the emergence and character of various Kurdish movements in these nation-states is the resistance against their specific denialist and oppressive policies. Hence, Vali suggests, contemporary Kurdish national identities emerged in a dynamic struggle over sovereignty with the nation-states and also other nationalist movements after the World War I.

More recent anthropological works on the Kurdish region of Turkey provide ethnographically rich accounts of everyday struggles over sovereignty in the Kurdish region (Bozcali 2014, Darici 2011, Darici and Neyzi 2013, 2015, Duzel 2016, Gambetti 2004, Hakyemez 2016, 2017, Kucuk and Ozselcuk 2016, Ozcan 2014, Ozsoy 2010, 2013, Sengul 2013, Ustundag 2016, Yildirim 2011). Hisyar Ozsoy’s (2010) work, with its focus on politico-symbolic deployments of death in figurations of national identity and sovereignty in the Kurdish region, is particularly significant for the purposes of this dissertation. Providing a rich historical account of contentions over the Kurdish dead between the Turkish state and Kurdish society and traversing various ethnographic settings such as funeral ceremonies, lost burial sites and homes of “families of value” (families of Kurdish martyrs), Ozsoy demonstrates how the Kurdish dead (specifically the bodies of Kurdish martyrs) appeared within a national-symbolic domain where struggles over sovereignty are waged and differential political identities are negotiated in the region.
My work draws on and expands this literature by introducing the question of political economy into the study of sovereignty and figurations of political identity in Turkey and the Kurdish region. Economic anthropology of Turkey and Kurdistan barely exists – something in line with the general trend in the anthropology of the Middle East (Elyachar 2005, 2015, Joseph 2015, Kandiyoti 2015). Furthermore, there are only a handful of sociological and historical works on the Kurdish region’s political economy (Kivilcimli 1979, Besikci 1969, Yalman 1971, Yuksel 2011). Nationalism, ethnic conflict, citizenship and social movements constitute the topical focus of much critical work in Kurdish studies (Bilgin and Sarihan 2013, Bozarslan 2004, Casier and Jongerden 2011, Dorronsoro and Watts 2013, Janet 2007, Gunes 2012, Soleimani 2016, White 2000, Yegen 2004, 2007, 2009, 2011), leaving the articulation of these issues with shifting political economic dynamics out of the scope of analysis. This dissertation addresses these perceived gaps in the scholarship on the Kurdish region of Turkey and the Middle East by connecting the question of violence and sovereignty to the analysis of governmental mechanisms of redistribution, such as welfare, through the analytic of debt. In doing so, I seek to account for political, economic and moral contestations which inform the figurations of Turkish and Kurdish identities, hence the Kurdish conflict in Turkey.

Contrarily, there is a vast sociological and historical literature on political economy of Turkey that examines relations between the state and various segments of the Turkish society in the context of changing national, international and global trends (Chapter 2). This literature is also complemented by more recent anthropologically informed works that focus on the articulations of neoliberalism with changing processes of class and identity formation (Tugal 2009, White 1999). Whereas these works demonstrate various and sometimes unexpected political alliances and negotiations among differently situated groups, shedding light on the emergence of new codes of distinction, allegiance and possibly new subjectivities in Turkey, their lack of attention to violence (specifically state violence or threat thereof) leads them to draw a too neat picture which precludes us from seeing the conflictual dynamics that may inform or interrupt these processes of enculturation and subjectivization.
1.5. The Indebted Anthropologist: Overview of the Methods

In getting at the complexity of my research methods, I would like to start with my own background and situatedness in the Turkish context. I am a “native” of Turkey who was born into an immigrant family from the Balkans (muhacir). My father’s Turkish-speaking, Muslim family came to Turkey three decades after the foundation of the Turkish Republic, in 1950, just after Bulgaria became part of the Soviet Bloc in the post World War II era. Indebtedness and allegiance to the Turkish state are strong sentiments that have run through my extended family for four generations (from my grandparents to my cousins’ children). When “communism came to Bulgaria,” my uncle Fahri told me, “we were peasants in a Muslim village on the Arda River.” My father’s family was not wealthy but still lived a decent life, cultivating their own lands and herding their animals. My grandfather is said to have had a temper. When he heard of the rumors that communism would also come to their village, expropriate and nationalize their lands, and change their Muslim/Turkish names to Christian/Bulgarian ones, he couldn’t hide his temper and spoke out in the village coffee-house against the Bulgarian government. Not a week had passed before the Bulgarian authorities showed up at the family’s door. They seized the house and deported all eleven family members including two babies, to a remote region of the country by freight train. Travelling for days without sufficient food and clean water, accompanied by a herd of sheep, they all got sick and lost one of the babies to illness. When they reached their destination, they had nothing other than their clothes and a shelter provided by the government – no money, no property, no ties to the local Bulgarian-majority community. Deprived of all capital to make their living, two of my elder uncles, who were in their early twenties at the time, secretly made their way to the Turkish Embassy in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital.

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13 See the discussion on the category of “Yerli and Milli” (Local/native and national) in Chapter 2.
Turkey was playing the role of a patron of Muslim populations in the Balkans, and once my father’s family prepared the necessary paperwork for immigration – with the help of Turkish authorities at the Embassy – they fled Bulgaria for their new country.

My father’s “Bulgar muhaciri” family lived a happy life in Turkey – one not unlike all happy Turkish or Turkified families’. In line with the resettlement laws in effect since the early years of the Republic, they were offered a plot of land in Tokat, a province in the inner Black Sea region, which was once predominantly populated by Armenians. My grandfather declined the offer. Unlike some indigenous Kurdish or Alevi families who refused to take a share of non-Muslim property that was forcefully expropriated by the Turkish state, my grandfather’s gesture was not one of respect to the prior owners of the land. He was rather concerned about his children’s prospects. In a small town like Tokat, they would not be able to continue their higher education or find a good job and they would end up being mere peasants.

The Turkish state was very understanding when it came to the wishes of muhacirs. Unlike non-Muslim and/or non-Turkish populations who were subject to strict resettlement policies, Turkish speaking muhacirs were granted the freedom to settle wherever they wanted in the country. However, the downside of declining the state’s initial offer was to be deprived of the land. My grandfather took a risk and chose to move to Tekirdag, a province in the Marmara region, adjacent to Istanbul where the state nonetheless provided him with a house. In Tekirdag, my two eldest uncles found jobs in local state offices and became civil servants (memur) – an occupation which provided them with a privileged position in society, a decent salary and state-sponsored social security benefits such as health-care insurance and a good pension plan. My uncle Fahri and my father attended public high schools in Tekirdag and then public universities in Istanbul. Receiving their degrees, they moved to Ankara, the capital, and
became civil servants in the state’s Irrigation and Dam Administration (Devlet Su İşleri, DSİ) and a state-owned bank (Denizcilik Bankası), respectively. Never forgetting or betraying the generosity of the Turkish state, all four brothers have been exemplary Turkish citizens throughout their lives. They have learned to speak Turkish “without an accent” (İstanbulite Turkish). Embracing a secular Turkish nationalist (Kemalist) political position, they have always voted for Atatürk’s party, CHP (“Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi,” Republican People’s Party). And as good memurs representing the state, they have paid special heed to their behaviors and attire at all times and abided the laws and regulations to an often ridiculous degree: like fighting with their children over not buying popular American brands, smuggled into the country before the 1980s, or waking up early each morning, shaving and wearing a tie even on weekends.

I provide these details to make sense of the ways in which my Turkishness – as daughter of a muhacir family from the Balkans – has meant an upbringing and a genealogy with a particular relation to the Turkish State and the moralities of indebtedness. As a Turkish national who went to the contested Kurdish region of Turkey to do fieldwork, I found myself in a situation where I had to question my seemingly straightforward position as a “native” and also negotiate my allegiances at all times. The topics I studied and my conceptual toolbox in studying them (state violence and benevolence, debt, and sovereignty) led to heated discussions with some of my family members, neighbors and acquaintances who identified themselves with the Turkish nation-state and quickly labeled Kurds as ungrateful traitors. Nonetheless, connecting these difficult discussions to the mainstream discourses in the Turkish news media and of Turkish authorities as well as to the political economic history of Turkey and the Kurdish region helped me discern and contextualize positions of my state
official informants in welfare offices where I spent a substantial amount of time during my fieldwork.

The analysis in the following chapters is based on extensive participant observation in the state-sponsored social assistance offices, Kurdish party controlled municipalities’ welfare initiatives, various Kurdish NGOs and grassroots organizations as well as among the people who paid bedel in three cities in the Kurdish region of Turkey, Diyarbakır, Van and Hakkari. In addition to participant observation, I conducted fifty in-depth interviews and collected life stories of many officials as well as those who bore the cost of Kurdish resistance. This integrative approach enabled me to expand my analysis of the Turkish state, sovereignty and governmentality beyond apparent state spaces and focus on the everyday instantiations of contradictory forms of indebtedness that are central to the production of Turkish and Kurdish political subjectivities.

I complemented my ethnographic fieldwork with the analysis of pro-Kurdish newspapers and magazines, main documents of the Kurdish Movement – such as writings of Abdullah Ocalan, Mazlum Dogan, Sakine Cansiz and published diaries of guerrillas – and speeches of the representatives of the Kurdish movement and Turkish authorities. Moreover, I relied on secondary sources on political and economic histories of Turkey and the Kurdish region in tracing the genealogies of Turkish and Kurdish debt moralities. Such analysis, I believe, added depth to my argument as it enabled me to further contextualize and historicize my ethnographic data, providing new perspectives into the cultural, political, economic and moral registers that inform the Kurdish conflict in Turkey.

Although being an educated Turkish woman enabled me to gain easy access to the state-sponsored social assistance offices, it made it difficult for me to build rapport
with my Kurdish interlocutors and approach the Kurdish NGOs, grassroots organizations and Kurdish movement-led welfare initiatives in the Kurdish region where bedel plays an overt role. Almost each time I met someone new, who openly identified as Kurdish, I was reminded of my Turkish identity as the occupier of Kurdistan. After kindly welcoming me to Kurdistan, asking whether I liked their country and inquiring about the reasons for my visit and the details of my research, many of my Kurdish acquaintances asked me the same question: “So where were you before, in the 1990s?” – referring to the years when the state violence peaked in the region. This subtle reference to the history of state violence in the region and my assumed complicity in it (in indirect and passive ways at the very best) was a sign of my indebtedness to the Kurdish community, in their eyes. My scholarly engagement with theories of sovereignty, biopolitics, subjectivization and positionality and also with Turkish and Kurdish histories obligates me to acknowledge the truth content in these counter-debt claims. Moreover, my position as an anthropologist obliges me to show my gratitude to my generous interlocutors in the Kurdish region through being honest to my data and writing with the awareness that my work will touch on the issues that are matters of life and death for many of them. This dissertation was informed by such scholarly responsibility and obligation to my interlocutors in the field.

1.6. The Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is structured around four main chapters. Chapter 2, “[The] Republic is Foremost the Benefactor of the Poor/Abandoned”: Moral Economy of Turkish Citizenship, offers a reading of the political economic history of Turkey through the lens of debt in an effort to trace the genealogy of a particular moral economic relationship between the Turkish state and its citizens. The chapter starts with an analysis of the shifting definitions of yerli ve milli (local/native and national), which
inform who is included in and excluded from the Turkish national polity from the late
tenenteenth century onward. Situating these shifts within the political and economic
history of Turkey, specifically the twin processes of state-led redistribution and
dispossession, the chapter shows how Turkish citizens have been rendered in debt to the
state through the dialectic of state benevolence and violence. Unlike the majority of
works on the political economic history of Turkey, which exclusively focus on the role of
state endowments in their analysis of state–citizen relations, with a marginal attention to
the processes of state violence and dispossession, this chapter reads these two histories
against each other in accounting for the emergence of the figure of the indebted citizen
in Turkey.

Chapter 3, “Paying the Price”: Debts of the State, Obligations of Being a Kurd,
shifts the attention to Turkish Kurdistan and situates the counter-moral economy of
bedel within a century-long history of state violence and Kurdish resistance in the
region. In an effort to provide an overview of political economic history of the region—
which is key to understanding what bedel is and yet rarely discussed in the literature—
the first section of the chapter brings together various historical, sociological and
anthropological accounts on Kurds and Kurdistan with writings of Turkish leftist and
Kurdish political activists. As such, the chapter seeks to show how the state’s increasing
presence in the region since the mid-nineteenth century has been experienced by the
majority of Kurds as a political and economic dispossession. The chapter then moves to
Kurdish political mobilization since the 1960s and analyzes how Kurdish activists’
discourses and practices offered a rereading of this history that renders the Turkish state
indebted to Kurds for the losses it caused. I also show how the Turkish state’s
representation as an occupier or colonizer, especially by the PKK, introduced a new
moral logic into the Kurdish community—a logic that foregrounds decolonization (both
at collective and individual levels) and considers *bedel ödemek* as the foremost obligation of any Kurd to achieve emancipation.

Chapter 4, *The Debt-Producing Machine: State-Sponsored Welfare in Turkish Kurdistan*, traces the interplay between the hegemonic Turkish debt morality and bedel within the welfare governance. This chapter focuses largely on the decision-making practices of local welfare officials, who enjoy an immense discretionary power in selecting beneficiaries. Drawing on my research in the state-sponsored welfare offices, the chapter shows that many officials’ practices were informed by ideas deriving from a hegemonic debt relationship that promotes welfare as state benevolence and expects beneficiaries to repay their debt through loyalty and subservience. Although bedel leaks into welfare distribution—through the moral judgments of Kurdish officials—it works in the shadows, remaining largely silent and secret. This suppression of bedel, I suggest, bespeaks the state’s role in denying its own violence and in asserting a unidirectional debt relation that subjugates citizens by politically and economically dispossessing them. Illustrating how state-sponsored social welfare governance operates as a violent debt-producing mechanism, the chapter demonstrates the ways in which sovereign violence is intrinsic to the state’s governmental practices in Turkish Kurdistan.

However, the domain of social welfare is not limited to the central state-sponsored welfare programs in the region. Over the years various components of the Kurdish movement have initiated their own welfare programs. Just as with centrally organized, public social assistance programs, alleviation of poverty constitutes the main framework in which these initiatives operate. However, bedel plays a more overt role in these initiatives’ approach to social welfare than it does in centrally organized, public social assistance programs. This difference can be traced to the categories and vocabularies municipality-led initiatives use as well as to their practices of beneficiary
selection. In their discourse they emphasize debts of the state to the Kurds for its violence and destruction of livelihood—hence the pauperization of Kurdistan. In their practices they incorporate those who paid the utmost price, such as the “families of value” (families of Kurdish martyrs), families of political prisoners, ex-political prisoners and victims of forceful displacement.

Chapter 5, “Whoever Owes a Debt Should Pay It”: Kurdish Movement-Led Welfare in Turkish Kurdistan, traces the ways in which bedel is incorporated into the workings of municipality-led welfare programs and illustrates how this incorporation opens up room for the nurturing of resistant subjectivities and socialities that challenge the unilateral debt relationship the state imposes as well as the political and economic dispossession it entails. I thus argue that such incorporation of bedel politicizes welfare and constitutes an obstacle to the enforcement of the Turkish state’s sovereign power in the region by means of welfare governance.
2. “[The] Republic is Foremost the Benefactor of the Poor/Abandoned”: Moral Economy of Turkish Citizenship

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory (...) therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such inventory.

Antonio Gramsci

It is 1925, the first years of the Turkish Republic following its foundation by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (literally “Father-Turk”). Sabiha is a 12 year-old orphan, who resides in Bursa with her elder brother. Hearing that “Father Turk” is paying a visit to her city, she finds a way of approaching him, just to tell him how much she wants to go to school. Ataturk is renowned for his kindness to little children. Impressed by this little orphan’s endurance and desire for education, he takes Sabiha back to Ankara, the capital, and adopts her. As documented in various stories and in many photos, Father Turk is exceptionally loving and benevolent toward his adopted daughter. He plays, goes swimming, and swings with her. He also sends Sabiha to the best schools, names her after the sky, Sabiha Gökçen, and helps her become the first woman fighter pilot in Turkish history. A true success story that puts flesh on the bones of the famous Ataturk motto: “[The] Republic is foremost the benefactor of the poor / abandoned.”

While the official (hi)story represents Sabiha Gökçen as the epitome of the newly-founded Turkish Republic’s benevolence and virtue, other stories, side stories about her

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14 Gramsci 1971: 25
15 Gökçen means one who belongs to the sky
biography, absent or silenced in the official narrative, depict a much grimmer picture. Wasn’t Sabiha the daughter of an Armenian family that was massacred by the Turkish State during the Armenian genocide in 1915? Wasn’t she one among thousands of Armenian orphans who had been Turkified by their very beneficent patrons? And isn’t it the case that Sabiha Gokcen earned her much admired reputation as the first Turkish female fighter pilot in 1937 when she participated in an air strike against an eastern province of Turkey, Dersim where thousands of Alevi-Kurds were massacred yet again by the Turkish armed forces? These side stories hint at the interconnections between the violent and benevolent faces of the Turkish Republic, as they evince “how the taking of lives, lands and resources could so quickly be narrated as forms of giving, indeed as gifts worth receiving” (Grant 2009: xiii). Nonetheless they remain fragmented and often unrecuperated - as, unlike the official narratives, they lack a public forum in which they might become a full-blown narrative.

This chapter is a history of a particular moral economic relationship between the Turkish state and its citizens – a relationship which is characterized by a profound indebtedness to the state. As Deniz Yukseler (2010) put it, Turkish citizens are born indebted to the state. This is such a widespread notion that it finds expression in idioms such as “eating the bread of the state” (“Devletin ekmegini yemek”) or “may god be pleased with the state” (“Allah devletten razi olsun”). The general tendency in Turkey is to explain this phenomenon through an almost natural/inevitable gratitude felt by

16 We owe the publishing of these alternative narratives to the courageous efforts of Hrant Dink, an Armenian intellectual and journalist. Upon publishing the story of Sabiha Gokcen at Agos in 2004, Dink became a target of Turkish ultra-nationalist frenzy. Getting death threats from anonymous people, Dink went to the Turkish police, where he was “warned” once again, this time by some higher level police officials and Turkish Intelligence personnel (MIT) about the possible future consequences of his actions. But he did not retreat. Instead he kept writing in Turkish newspapers and Agos, and appearing on TV programs and at conferences. On January 19, 2007, he was shot in the back and killed in one of the busiest streets of Istanbul. Two days later, the perpetrator, a 19 year-old Turkish nationalist was turned in to the police by his father at a local police station in Trabzon, where the policemen and gendarmes proudly took souvenir pictures with Samast holding a Turkish flag.
Turkish citizens for the state’s generous endowments. The chapter seeks to complicate such interpretation by reading histories of redistribution and dispossession against each other, situating the making of the indebted citizen within a dialectic of state benevolence and violence.

In Turkey, distribution of public resources has been historically highly selective across religious and ethnic lines, systematically eliminating and marginalizing the potentially unruly Non-Muslims and Non-Turkified populations from the political economic domain. And those populations, who have been successfully Turkified, have been granted a share of these resources, based on their close contacts and alliances with the political elite and by demonstrating their allegiance to the state. This dual mechanism is central to the production of Turkishness – a political as well as an ethnic category that defines citizenship in Turkey\(^\text{17}\). It is through this back and forth between selective dispossession and redistribution, I suggest, those who identify as Turkish tend to see the state as a benevolent patron, feel indebted for the endowments it bestows and ignore prior and ongoing histories of state violence and dispossession.

To understand how Turkish identity has been produced, the chapter starts with a brief overview of the Ottoman state’s overt control over the socio-economic life within the empire – through a land-tenure system and mechanisms that regulate production of surplus value and trade. This section will help us better understand and contextualize the state-society relations that still pervade contemporary Turkey. The second section will trace the shifting definitions of citizenship in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey since the late 19\(^\text{th}\) century with an emphasis on the political, social and economic transformations that informed these changes. Here, I will particularly focus on the

\(^{17}\) In the Turkish Constitution Turkish citizenship correspond to Turkishness. Article 66 defines Turkish citizenship along these lines: “everyone who is bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk.” (Turkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasasi, 1981: Article 66)
concept of “yerli ve milli” (local/native and national) – a notion which sets the boundaries of inclusion into the national polity and still dominates the Turkish political discourse. Finally, I will examine socio-economic policies of the Turkish Republic in a way to explain how the selective character of redistributive mechanisms and endowments that foster the patronage of the state have been instrumental in forcing different segments of Turkish citizenry into a debt relation with the state.

2.1. Eating the Bread of the State: State and Economy in the Ottoman Empire

The long-durée history of “state benevolence,” which still today marks the hegemonic perception of the Turkish state, can be traced to the early years of the Ottoman Empire. As Ottoman historian Ilkay Sunar (1987) put it, “economic life in the Ottoman Empire was organized as a redistributive system by a patrimonial state” (p.63) wherein the central state has an overt control over the production, appropriation and distribution of economic resources. This dominance of the state over economy demonstrated itself in three main sectors, namely agriculture, urban crafts and trade (Inan-Islamoglu and Keyder 1987).

The Ottoman land tenure system, which was partially inherited by the Republic, is crucial in understanding the central role of the state in resource allocation.

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18 The Turkish state was founded in the first quarter of the 20th century upon the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. The official Turkish history posits a clear-cut distinction between the Empire and the new state. Unlike the Ottoman Empire which covered vast areas including the Balkans and the Middle East and considered its ethnically and religiously diverse inhabitants to be subjects of the Sultan, the new Turkish state was restricted in size and defined itself as a republic composed of rights-bearing citizens. Nonetheless, there are significant continuities between these two polities, especially in terms of their economic policies (Toprak 2012).

19 According to Caglar Keyder (1987), Ottoman land tenure system very much resembles its Byzantian counterpart, where the peasantry had remained relatively independent compared to a system of serfdom. Ottomans, embracing Byzantian civilization, took over and reproduced this politico-economic structure and class composition. However, by the end of the Byzantine, local lords and Byzantine-Turkic mandates had started to gain power and a trend toward feudalisation had emerged, diminishing the independent character of peasantry. Once Ottomans maintained their authority over Anatolia, they sought to restore the prior centralized order by eliminating local mandates and restoring the independence of petty producers.
According to the Ottoman legislation, majority of the land belonged to the dynasty, with the officially sanctioned functionaries (sipahi) holding temporary tenure (timar) at the will of the Sultan. Within these timars, a unit of land was granted to each peasant family who were to pay a tax to the Ottoman state, collected by the delegated state functionaries (timar-holder sipahis). These functionaries, in turn, either transferred the tax or delivered usually military or sometimes civic service to the center. Whereas sipahis’ have a privileged status, hence access to more resources than peasant subjects, unlike feudal lords in medieval Europe, they derived their status not from inheritance or local influence but directly from the central state. Their privileges could easily be revoked at the will of the Sultan or the central state, destroying their fortunes and reducing them to mere subjects. As such, Ottoman functionaries’ gaining political power and accumulating capital through land-ownership were precluded – a condition which led to the emergence of a direct patron-client relationship between the central state and independent peasants, reinforcing an image of the state/Sultan as the only sovereign and benefactor of the people.

The Ottoman state’s centralized control over economy was not limited to rural land-tenure and agricultural production. In the cities, the state imposed strict controls over urban crafts production and trade, ensuring the delivery of surplus to the major cities, especially Istanbul (Porte) and preventing capital accumulation outside of the central state. In the Ottoman cities and towns, guilds undertook craft production. These

Other scholars (Inan-Islamoglu 1987, Sunay 1987) points out the significance of Islamic precepts – especially that of the land’s belonging to the God – in the Ottomans’ embracing a land-tenure system in which private ownership of land was restricted.

Whereas this was the rule across the majority of Ottoman territory, the Ottoman history is full of exceptions to the rule. First of all, the Ottomans were not quite successful in expanding this centralized land tenure system to the relatively inaccessible and peripheral regions of the empire, such as Kurdistan, Caucasus and Albania. At these places, local notables enjoyed some political and economic autonomy, similar to that of European feudal lords.
guilds’ operations were strictly governed by a system called hisba which included measures regarding the production process, specifically the allocation and movement of raw materials and quantity, quality and prices of manufactures. Similarly, circulation of goods through trade and regional markets were rigorously regulated through mechanisms such as: the state’s sanctioning the establishment of regional and inter-regional markets and determining their locations; imposition of market taxes and customs dues; and limiting the purchase of goods to officially sanctioned merchants. The main concern here was the concentration of the surplus at the political center which, in turn, enables provisioning of the society through the movement of goods from center to the populace as well as through endowments bestowed by the state (Keyder and Inan-Islamoglu 1987, Sunar 1987, Wallerstein et.al. 1987).

In sum, this socio-economic structure wherein “the distributors are rulers and the producers the ruled” (Sunar 1987: 67) seems to have legitimized the central state’s appropriation of economic resources (especially the land) and the surplus. The concentration of surplus at the center and its redistribution – according to subjects’ status or relative proximity to the state – served to the formation of a pervasive network of patron-client relations and an over-arching political administrative system backed by Islamic notions of justice and equity. In this scheme of things, where economic activity was a function of the state and welfare of the population was conditioned on the maintenance of the state, there might have emerged a hegemonic view of the state as the hand of god, protector of his property and subjects and their wellbeing – a view that is reflected in the idiom of “eating the bread of the state.”

The period between the mid-sixteenth and nineteenth centuries constitutes an exception to this centralized political, economic and social structuring of the empire. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire began to lose its privileged economic
position, mainly due to shifting trade routes, rapid population increase, and increase in grain prices. This was followed by the notorious seventeenth century crisis which was marked a general rise in prices, struck all “world empires” at the time, including Britain, France, China and Safavids, and diminished their capacity to maintain authority in their territories (Gelvin 2016). Unable to integrate into the modern world system as a core player, the Ottoman Empire was peripheralized and its territorial integrity began to shatter (Inan-Islamoglu 1987, Keyder and Inan-Islamoglu 1987, Sunar 1987, Wallerstein et.al. 1987). Central taxation was gradually replaced by tax farming, which was based on the granting of economic privileges (mainly the right to collect taxes) to local notables in exchange for an advanced payment. Despite the fact that the land formally belonged to the Sultan, these developments led to an increased decentralization of the Empire and the emergence of powerful local notables, which challenged and constituted a threat to the central territorial and economic authority.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Ottoman sultans undertook deliberate policies to reverse the process of fragmentation and to centralize and expand their authority. Their goal was to strengthen the state in the face of internal and external threats and to make government more proficient in managing their populations and resources. To this end, they sought to eliminate tax farmers and other intermediaries who drew resources from the state, augment their administrations, introduce uniform legal practice and educate new administrators and soldiers, who were assumed to be more loyal to the Ottoman Dynasty. Although there is a controversy in the literature as to whether these policies succeeded in re-establishing a centralized control over socio-economic life within the Empire (Inalcik and Quataert 1994, Inan-Islamoglu 1987), one thing is for sure that they fostered the emergence of a new class of professional soldiers, bureaucrats and intellectuals who were educated in Western techniques and would soon
promote a model of national economy (milli ekonomi) wherein the state appeared as the central actor in shaping the socio-economic life.

2.2. *Yerli ve Milli* (Local/Native and National): Shifting Definitions of Citizenship

In a public meeting entitled, “Millions of souls’ single voice against the terror” (Milyonlarca nefes terore karsi tek ses), organized in Istanbul before the November 1, 2015 national elections, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addressed the crowd: “I ask you to send 550 yerli ve milli MPs [to the parliament] who will serve this country wholeheartedly. I know you understand what I mean” (BBC Turkce 2015). In a context where the new rising star of Turkish politics was the Kurdish-led multi-ethnic, multi-religious and left-leaning HDP (“Halklarin Demokrasi Partisi,” Peoples’ Democracy Party), “yerli ve milli” (local/native and national) had become the catchwords of the governing AKP’s (“Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi,” Justice and Development Party) 2015 election campaign. Losing many parliamentary seats (especially those representing the Kurdish provinces) to the HDP in the previous June 11, 2015 elections, Turkish president Erdogan and his prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu had embraced a new strategy: halting the peace negotiations with the Kurdish movement, resuming the uncompromising war against “terror” and accusing the HDP of being the legal wing of the “separatist” and “terrorist” PKK. Hence the catchphrase yerli ve milli gained a renewed visibility in Turkish political discourse, acquiring new meanings and redefining the terms of inclusion into the Turkish citizenry, hence the political and economic spheres in Turkey.

I recall the word yerli from my elementary school years in the mid-1980s, when we celebrated “the week of local/national products” (Yerli Mali Haftasi) in December. Inaugurated in the aftermath of the WWII to prevent monetary flows to foreign
countries and create awareness about the importance of national economy, Yerli Mali Haftasi was an occasion for Turkish children to demonstrate their allegiance to Turkish national values and also their creativity. Each child would bring a local/national product to the school, mostly local produce (apples from Amasya, tangerines from Antalya, dried apricots from Malatya), dress in a way that represented the produce chosen (become an apple, tangerine or apricot) and feast altogether on that local produce while reading poems and chanting slogans like “Local/national product is a product of the motherland, everyone should use it [only]” (Yerli mali yurdun mali, herkes onu kullanmali). Born into a Kemalist family, with one side originally from Thessaloniki, Greece (Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s hometown), and feeling much gratitude to Father-Turk and the Republic for all they had bestowed on us, I remember being much moved by the collective effervescence of Yerli Mali Haftasi, feeling proud of and bragging about my family’s dedication to national values. Not only were we good Turkish citizens committed to Ataturk ilkeleri (Ataturk’s principles), but also we demonstrated our devotion materially, by preferring national/local products: My parents smoked state-monopoly Tekel’s Maltepe cigarettes not the American brands; my black school uniform was hand-made by my mother using state-owned Sumerbank cloth; and our electrical appliances were Arcelik, produced by the Turkish Koc Company, not European or American brands.

The history of the national economy in Turkey dates back to the early 20th century, when nation and citizenship emerged as pivotal concepts in Ottoman political thought. On July 23, 1909 (July 10, 1324 hijri), the largest exposition in Ottoman history was opened in Bursa, as a gesture to commemorate the first anniversary of Mesrutiyet II (which restored the constitutional monarchy by reviving the Ottoman parliament, the General Assembly, and the Ottoman Constitution of 1876). While the Bursa Exposition
followed the tradition of world fairs, initiated in the nineteenth century by the fast industrializing countries of Europe and North America to advertise their products, it had significance beyond Ottomans’ aspirations for Westernization. It was also part of the new Ottoman political elites’ nation-building efforts. The Bursa Exposition also bore the first signs of a neo-mercantilist milli ıktisat (national economy), which would soon gain currency in the Ottoman political circles (Toprak 2012).

Yerli mallar (local/national products) slogan constituted the main theme of the Bursa Exposition. Demonstrations comprised products or produce of the Ottoman soil: silk from Aleppo, Damascus and Bursa; felt and silver-gilt thread from Usak; jewelry from Istanbul and Thessaloniki; Sishane cannons; a railway engine model made by an Ottoman Naval Academy teacher… (Toprak 2012). Until the Mesrutiyet, origin of consumer products had not been of concern in the Ottoman Empire. Economic liberalism was the predominant paradigm at the time and classical economics was preaching that international trade was favorable to all countries. The borders of the Empire were more porous and the Ottomans had granted privileges to foreign residents and merchants through bilateral agreements (capitulations or “ahdnames”) with European powers, particularly France. But all this was changing in the politically tense and war-ridden climate of the early 20th century. The new Ottoman political elite was concerned about the prospects of the Empire in the face of shifts in the world economy and the rise of nationalist movements, particularly in the Balkans. Their goal was to recuperate the Ottoman state (which was deemed the “sick man of Europe” by the English) and save the Empire from an otherwise inevitable dissolution. To this aim, they emphasized the importance of restructuring the Empire both administratively and socio-economically. If creation of a collective identity - which would protect the ethnically and religiously diverse Ottoman Empire from the disintegrating effects of emerging
nationalisms - constituted one of the main tenets of their political project (union), the other was to consolidate the “Ottoman citizenry” by promising them progress and prosperity.

It is against this backdrop that the Bursa Exposition of 1909 was organized under the theme of yerli mallar. Unlike previous Ottoman expositions of the late 19th century, foreign/imported commodities did not find a place in the Bursa Exposition. All demonstrated items had been produced by “Ottoman citizens.” Citizens were called on to use yerli products instead of the fancy-looking yet ill-made and fraudulent commodities of foreign origin. It was said that because Ottoman citizens were allured by these flashy imports that Ottoman artisanship had lost its allure, commerce had broken down, and that peasants and workers had become impoverished, with the wealth of the country funneled into foreign pockets (Toprak 2012). The Bursa Exposition was an indication of the shift in mindset. A new social category, “Ottoman citizenry,” was being constructed vis-à-vis the ills of foreign influence, and all of the Ottoman populace, of diverse social classes, ethnicities and religious backgrounds, were invited to embrace and unite under this category for a more prosperous future.

However, it did not take long for the notion of “Ottoman citizenry” to be thrown into the dustbin of history. The Balkan Wars erupted in 1912, and resulted in the Ottoman Empire’s losing almost all remaining European territories, including Thessaloniki, in 1913. Along with hundreds of thousands of Muslim peoples of the Balkans, all cadres of the new political elite – now known as Young Turks and increasingly organized under a clandestine organization, the CUP (“Ittihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti,” the Committee of Union and Progress), whose main base was the multicultural and liberal port city of Thessaloniki, had to migrate to Istanbul, the capital of the Empire. Albeit ethnically and religiously diverse, Istanbul was a city where overt
tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects of the Empire saturated everyday life. Whereas the Muslim elite, who were employed as state or military officials and linked to the Ottoman Dynasty through patronage relations, kinship and marital ties (Sirman 2007) enjoyed the benefits of having an intimate relation to the state-center, non-Muslims (who were deprived of such state privileges yet favored by European powers as mediators of commercial activities protected by bilateral agreements - capitulations) held the majority of industries, trade and finance in their hands (Bugra 1994, Inalcik and Quataert 1994). In a context marked by an increasing paranoia about the disintegration of the Empire, the riches and economic power of non-Muslims became a concern not only among the Muslim elite, but also among the Muslim shopkeepers and artisans of Istanbul, who had a remarkable influence on the Muslim constituents of the capital. Their interests lay in the continuance of the Ottoman State (their main consumer base) and were at odds with those of (mainly non-Muslim) tradesmen and merchants. This overlap in the interests and anxieties of the Muslim elite and constituents quickly translated into the ideological and organizational core of the CUP.

The CUP in Istanbul was increasingly dominated by cadres who were now inspired by the successes of the latecomer Germany on the world politico-economic scene and they propagated the idea of the importance of national unity (at once political, social and economic). Liberalism was now considered a ploy of the European powers to achieve their imperialist aims and enhance their dominance over the rest of the world. Having close ties with the European powers, the non-Muslim tradesmen were suspect. Siding with Muslim petty shopkeepers and artisans rather than with non-Muslim dominated trade associations in Istanbul, the CUP undertook efforts to reorganize these groups as a way of achieving national development and strengthening its influence and control over the constituency. They passed laws to overthrow guilds and institutionalize
new shopkeeper and artisan societies. These societies’ spokesmen had been chosen by the CUP, leading to the development of organic ties between the CUP and petty shopkeepers and artisans (Toprak 2012).

Following the Balkan wars, the notion of an “Ottoman citizenry” totally lost its currency. Ottoman citizenship as an umbrella category, which was thought to unify diverse populations of the Empire had proven to be ineffective in fulfilling its aim. Only some elite identified as Ottoman and the Balkan Wars were considered an indication of Ottoman identity’s incapacity to prevent the emergence and spread of nationalist sentiments, particularly among those non-Muslim populations of the Empire. Gaining full control of the government through the 1913 coup d’état, the CUP took an overt nationalist character with an aim to save the state.

World War I provided a fertile ground for the CUP to realize its economic nationalization and ethnic and religious homogenization projects. Joining the war on the side of the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary, the first economic measure the Ottoman state took was to annul the commercial privileges provided to the European powers (through capitulations), unilaterally. This was followed by strict restrictions imposed on foreign companies’ activities and the nationalization of some. A national economy model, inspired by German romanticism and based on statism, was being embraced and implemented by the CUP. Alongside restrictions and regulations on international trade, the CUP also aimed at nationalization of the internal market through founding joint-stock companies composed of petty producers, a national bank and

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21 The 1913-1914 “Müslüman Boykotajı” (Muslim Boycott) is a good example of how these developments resonated in the everyday economic life of Istanbul. Around five hundred new Muslim small shops had been opened in the city. With the active participation of the CUP-led shopkeeper society, lists including the names and addresses of Muslim shopkeepers were prepared and circulated, and Muslims were called on to stop shopping from non-Muslim merchants and shopkeepers. The Greek Patriarchate demonstrated its concerns about the boycott. However, this attempt backfired, resulting in the CUP-affiliated spokesperson of the shopkeeper society initiating a campaign specifically targeting the Greeks (Toprak 2012).
cooperatives, which enabled the transfer of trading activities from foreign and non-Muslim hands to the Muslim-Turkish constituents. During the world war years, the state gained an unprecedented prominence in the economic domain, especially through redistributing economic resources to the advantage of Muslim-Turkish populations, who were deemed yerli ve milli due to their actual or presumed allegiance to the nationalist project (Toprak 2012).

However, the CUP’s nationalization efforts were not limited to a mere reorganization of the economic activity around the state. In the World War I years, the paranoia of disintegration fully possessed the CUP cadres and the goal of achieving social cohesion and unification predominated over all other political concerns. This was such a strong aspiration that the CUP did not refrain from even the most radical and bloody “solutions” to overcome potential obstacles along the way to national unity, including genocide. The usual suspects, non-Muslim populations of the Empire became the main targets of the CUP’s homogenization policies. On April 24, 1915, Ottoman authorities rounded up, arrested and deported 250 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders from Istanbul to Ankara. Eastern Anatolian territories of the Empire were under the threat of Russian occupation at the time and Orthodox Christian populations had already been deemed pawns of Russia and other European powers. The April 24 incident was followed by a huge “cleansing” campaign carried out all across the dominion, targeting mainly Armenians but also Assyrians and Greeks. Able-bodied men were killed or subjected to forced labor in the concentration camps, where many died due to hunger and disease. Women, children and the elderly were forced to death marches toward the Syrian desert Deir ez-zor. Driven forward by military escorts (including Ottoman soldiers, members of Teskilat-i Mahsusa [the CUP founded Intelligence Organization] and Hamidian cavalries composed mainly of irregular Sunni-
Muslim Kurdish and to a lesser extent of Turkish, Turkoman, Yuruk and Arab armed men), the deportees were deprived of food and water and subjected to robbery, rape and massacre (Akcam 2012). By 1918, the Anatolian soil was “cleansed” of around 1.5 million non-Muslims, mostly Armenians – corresponding to around half of the non-Muslim Ottoman population in 1914 (Karpat 1995).

As Taner Akcam and Umit Kurt (2015:1) put it “[t]his deportation and destruction also gave rise to an important question: What was going to happen to the property of the Armenians left behind? How would they be administered?” On September 13, 1915, just a couple of months after deportations began, the Ottoman parliament passed the “Abandoned Properties Law,” stating that all property, including land, livestock and homes belonging to the deportees was to be “administered” by the authorities (Dadrian 1995). The Law was a structural component of the nation-building efforts of the CUP through ethnic cleansing and homogenization. Not only the “abandoned” properties of Armenians, but also goods of other Orthodox Christians were subject to the same procedure – a procedure which involved the state’s taking over and liquidating non-Muslim property based on certain priorities, including their distribution among the Muslim population (Akcam and Kurt 2015).

The forced displacement and massacring of indigenous non-Muslims that marked the World War I years was followed by a massive influx of Muslim immigrants mainly from the Balkans, Black Sea and Caucasus regions. Although the first waves of this immigration date back to the Russo-Ottoman and Balkan Wars, the devastating effects of World War I and the promises of an independent nation-state burgeoning in Anatolia took it to a new, unprecedented scale. The Ottomans’ losing the Great War to the Entente powers in 1918 also put the Anatolian peninsula, the centerpiece of Turkish
nationalist movement, at risk. On May 19, 1919, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), one of the military commanders of the Ottoman army backed up by nationalist cadres, left Istanbul for the Anatolian interior to organize a nationalist campaign which would soon turn into a full-fledged war against “foreign powers/invaders” by rallying the Anatolian Muslims, “emphasizing their common religion, shared history and joint territory” (Cagaptay 2006: 11). This nationalist campaign which later would be called Kurtulus Savasi (the Turkish War of Independence) lasted for four years, and led to the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. During these years, Anatolia was not only “cleansed of the enemies” but also rendered the motherland of Turkish (or soon-to-be Turkish) Muslim indigenous and immigrant populations.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, around 800,000 Muslim immigrants poured into the country that they considered home. At the same time, emigration of Orthodox-Christian populations (this time mainly Greeks) from Turkey continued, and was secured with the 1923 population exchange agreement with Greece. Turkey also signed an agreement with Romania to facilitate emigration from this country, and entered accords with Albania, Armenia and Bulgaria to regulate citizenship-related matters. As Cagaptay (2006: 82) points out, “these treaties mentioned not the Turks, but Muslims as the primary object of Turkey’s interests.” This emphasis on Islam as the prerequisite for access to Turkey becomes more visible in the enactment of these agreements. For instance, during the population exchange with Greece, “Turkish-speaking Greek-Orthodox Karamanlis were sent over to Greece, while the Greek-speaking Muslim populations of Crete and Yannina came to Turkey” (Cagaptay 2006: 83). Similarly, Greek-Orthodox Gagavuz Turks from Romania were not allowed to migrate to Turkey.

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22 Armenian armies grabbed large parts of eastern Anatolia in 1918. French-led Armenian legions from Syria took control of the major cities of Cilicia in 1919. And Greek armies took over the Aegean Coast in 1919 and soon expanded into the Anatolian interior.
As the once-Ottoman Muslims poured in, the Turkish state needed legislation to cope with and regulate the influx. Hence the first resettlement law, “Iskan Kanunu,” was adopted in 1926, and followed by another resettlement law in 1934. While the law determined Turkish culture (and later race) as the basis of incorporation into Turkish citizenry, the question of who bears these traits was answered vis-à-vis the incoming populations’ potential for integration (assimilation) into Turkish culture and also their allegiance to the state. A circular on resettlement and population matters from the 1930s evinces this policy:

“This circular commanded the local authorities to swiftly grant citizenship certificates to those immigrants who had not yet been naturalized. ‘Those who belong to the Turkish race, or those who share Turkish culture, speak Turkish, and know no other languages’ were to receive their naturalization papers without inspection. Pomaks [Bulgarian Muslims], Bosnian Muslims, Crimean Tatars, and Karapapaks were to be treated likewise. As for Muslim Georgians, Lezgis, Chechens, Circassians and Abkhazes, they were to be given nationality certificates only after being investigated by the Interior Ministry. On the other hand, Kurds, Arabs, Albanians, and other non-Turkish speaking Muslims, as well as Christians and Jews [new immigrants not indigenous or already settled ones], were not entitled to receive naturalization papers.” (Cagaptay 2015: 96)

What makes this circular significant for the purposes of this dissertation is not so much the ethnic bias in granting Turkish citizenship. At least since the 1924 Constitution, “Turkishness” has been the hallmark of citizenship in Turkey. However, what has marked citizenship debates since then is whether Turkishness denotes a civic/political membership or an ethnic identity. The circular reflects this tension between Turkishness as a political and ethnic category, and how it was attempted to be resolved in practice in the early years of the Republic, and how Turkish ethnicity, defined mainly in terms of language, has come to dominate the definition of citizenship. But what is more interesting is the state’s stance regarding the naturalization of non-Turkish (speaking) populations. The circular manifests a categorization exercised in these populations’ inclusion into Turkish citizenship. While certain non-Turkish immigrant groups (Pomaks, Bosnians, Crimean Tatars and Karapapaks) were more
smoothly accepted into Turkish citizenry, just as immigrant Muslim Turks, others (Muslim Georgians, Lezgis, Chechens, Circassians and Abkhazes) were subjected to investigations before being naturalized. And Kurds, Arabs, Albanians (despite being Muslim) were categorized together with non-Muslims, and deemed not worthy of Turkish citizenship. It is in this categorization and implicit criterion that lie the answers to the new definition of yerli ve milli, hence the making of the moral economy of Turkish citizenship.

It seems that since the early years of the republic, presumed allegiance to the state has become the main determinant of Turkish citizenship. This implicit policy is most visible in diverse immigrant groups’ inclusion into or exclusion from Turkish citizenry. Non-Muslim populations of the Ottoman Empire had already been associated with the foreign (European) powers at least since the late nineteenth century (when the national independence movements took root predominantly among the non-Muslim majority areas of the Empire, and resulted in immense territorial losses). The Entente powers supporting Armenians’ and Greeks’ (the two biggest Non-Muslim groups) territorial claims in Anatolia in the aftermath of the World War I exacerbated the already present suspicion toward these populations. Although the few non-Muslim populations of Anatolia, who survived the genocide and were exempted from population exchanges, were granted the status of minorities and their rights were protected through the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, they nonetheless couldn’t evade being marked as foreigners in Turkey. Not only were the new non-Muslim immigrants’ access to Turkish citizenship precluded (through legislations like the circular above), but also the citizenship rights of those indigenous non-Muslims (including their right to political representation and private property) have been curbed with throughout the republican history.
The Republic did not welcome Kurdish and Arab immigrants either because their allegiance to the state was considered dubious. Arabs remained more or less loyal to the Ottoman state until the World War I. However, led by the British and French, they shifted sides during the Great War and “stabbed the state in the back.” Kurds’ position was more complicated. Although Kurdish uprisings date back to the mid-19th century, many Kurdish tribes sided with the Ottoman state before and during the great war, first against Armenians and Assyrians and later against the Allied Forces as conscripted soldiers. They also fought against French and Russian-led Armenian forces in Eastern Anatolia during the War of Independence, and were represented in the first Turkish parliament congregated in 1920 (Yegen 2009). However, with the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, this strategic alliance between the state and Kurds began to shatter. Nationalist and centralizing tendencies of the new state led the Kurdish notables to question the promises of the republic. The Turkish political elite’s embracing an overtly nationalist stance exacerbated these concerns about Kurds’ prospects in the new nation-state, which was increasingly giving up its claims on Muslim alliance in favor of an adamant Turkification. Unlike other groups (non-Muslims, Albanians and Arabs) which did not have a significant presence in Anatolia, Kurds constituted the majority in eastern and southeastern borderlands of the country. Increasingly influenced by nationalist sentiments, Kurdish urban and military elites, local notables and religious leaders (Sheikhs), organized major uprisings in the second half of the 1920s (Sheikh Said and Agri Rebellions in 1925 and 1926 respectively), which were harshly suppressed by the Turkish state (Chapter 2). These tensions paved the way to the demotion of Kurds from “prospective” Turkish citizens (“mustakbel vatandas”) to “so-called citizens” (sozde vatandas), whose allegiance to the state cannot be trusted (Yegen 2009). It was under these circumstances that Kurds lost their yerli ve milli character and were
categorized with the usual-suspect Non-Muslims. Hence, while indigenous Kurds were officially granted Turkish citizenship, they have been politically and economically marginalized and their rights have been curtailed through various oppressive mechanisms ranging from forced resettlement to bans on Kurdish language and political organization. And those Kurds who remained outside of Turkish borders (despite their close kinship ties to now-Turkish citizen Kurds) were denied immigration status in Turkey.

It was only Bulgarian Pomaks, Bosnians, Crimean Tatars and Karapapaks along with the only-Turkish-speaking Muslim populations that fit into the new/Republican definition of yerli ve milli – and hence were accepted into Turkish citizenship with ease. Expelled or forced to flee from the Balkans (Rumelia) and the Caucasus, these populations (known as muhacirs – immigrants) found refuge in Anatolia. These Muslim immigrants were composed of diverse ethnic groups. Nonetheless, they were considered more docile and easily assimilable into the nation (Cagaptay 2006). Not only did they carry the memories of forceful expulsion by the enemies of the Turkish state, but also they were “kimsesiz” (abandoned), as they lacked any protection by foreign powers and also any political organization that would give them another collective identity, other than Turkish citizenship. Turkish Republic was foremost the benefactor of the poor and abandoned, providing these populations with various economic resources. Hence these Muslim immigrants (muhacirs) along with other allegiant populations of Anatolia would be made the new yerli and milli constituents of the Turkish Republic through intricate mechanisms of debt.
2.3. Indebted Citizens

Allegiance and a deep sense of indebtedness to the state inform subjectivities of most Turkish (or Turkified) populations in Turkey. Given the history of Turkish nationalism (Cagaptay 2006, Canefe 2002) and its significance in defining Turkish citizenship (Kirisci 2000, Yegen 2004, 2009), one may claim, debt of allegiance is key to the shaping of the relations between the state and citizens and defines the contours of the “true citizen” (makbul vatandas), making and re-making the moral economy of citizenship in Turkey. In what follows, I will trace the genealogy of this sense of allegiance-and-indebtedness back to the early years of Turkish Republic by focusing on the impacts of socio-economic policies on various social classes.

2.3.1. Turkish State Functionaries and Bourgeoisie

Since the foundation of the new Turkish state, the nation-building efforts of the republican political elite have gone hand in hand with attempts to create a national economy. Inspired by the successes of Germany and Italy (two latecomers to the modern world system, which nevertheless caught up with the imperialist powers through political and economic consolidation of their power), the founders of the republic put a strong emphasis on the importance of creating a self-sufficient national economy in achieving “real” independence – independence beyond a mere formal political status. Promoting this dual goal through slogans like “Citizen, the first target in the struggle for independence was the Mediterranean sea. Now the second aim is a national

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23 A brief look at the results of November 1, 2015 national elections demonstrates the vast extent of nationalism in Turkey. Political parties, which embraced a nationalist rhetoric (AKP, CHP and MHP) won around 87% of votes in this election. Albeit there are significant differences between nationalisms promoted by these parties (AKP’s is a more Islamist nationalism; CHP’s is of a more Kemalist, secular nationalism called ulusalcilik; and MHP’s is a more ethnic nationalism), all in all their orientation is toward promulgating yerli ve milli values.
The new Turkish political elite was not fundamentally different from their CUP predecessors in economic outlook. Their first priority, too, was the creation of a yerli ve milli bourgeoisie. Due to the genocide and population exchange policies, the majority of non-Muslims, who constituted 85% of the bourgeoisie and proletariat before the World War I (Bugra 1998, Quataert and Zurcher 1995) had been erased from Anatolia. Indigenous and immigrant Muslims were marginally involved in commercial and industrial activities, leaving Turkey with a problem—the absence of a bourgeois class—which was to assume the leading role in the economic development of the country. Under these circumstances, the Turkish state would undertake the mission of national development and implement various policy measures to establish an national private enterprise economy.

Whereas the specific content and form of these policies varied from one era to another, state support of the national bourgeoisie has been the single most important factor determining the composition of capital formation, business behavior, and the relations of businessmen to the state in Turkey (Bugra 1994). Due to the restrictions imposed on Turkey by the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, which precluded protectionist measures.

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24 It is said that during the final phase of the Turkish War of Independence in 1922 (during the so-called Büyük Taarruz [the major attack] against the Greek forces-occupied Aegean region, Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) called on the Turkish soldiers with the following words: “Ordular ilk hedefiniz Akdenizdir. Ileri!” (“Troops, your first target is the Mediterranean. Go/Attack!”). This is considered the most critical moment in the Turkish War of Independence, and one can find these words of Mustafa Kemal inscribed on the walls of public buildings, mainly the schools and army, all across Turkey.

25 A quote from a publication of the Department of Military History of the General Staff of Turkey cited by Cetinoglu (2012) attests to the continuity between the CUP and the Turkish Republic in terms of the goal of indigenization and nationalization of economy: “Despite the start of the policy of nationalization of the economy in the year 1908 by the Committee of Union and Progress, and the measures of 1915, it is not wrong to mention that the overall power of non-Muslims and foreigners on the Ottoman economy did not decrease. This situation changed after the First World War gradually and especially with the intervention of administration after the 1930s, with the establishment of the Republican People’s Party [CHP] through its nationalization policies of the economy.” (p.20)
trade tariffs until 1929, the Turkish state had to embrace a more liberal economic approach in the first decade of its foundation. Nevertheless, these restrictions did not prevent the state from playing the engine of national economy. The state’s involvement in economic activity intensified in this first decade – through the establishment of national banks and the nationalization of foreign-held enterprises, mainly the railways and sea transportation. Also the Lausanne Treaty allowed the establishment of state monopolies and the imposing of higher prices on their products. Hence, various state monopolies were founded in these years and they became one of the most common and effective ways of breeding a new indigenous bourgeoisie. In line with the predominant mentality of the time, the state would soon transfer these monopolies to Turkish private companies and national-foreign joint ventures, which were founded by high-level bureaucrats or individuals having close ties to the political elite. Moreover, the privatization of these monopolies was held in such a way that many private companies acquired these state monopolies without any payment and in some instances even the operating capital of “privatized” monopolies was provided by the state (Boratav 2008).

The Turkish state’s efforts to create a national bourgeoisie were not limited to the establishment and transfer (or endowment) of monopolies to the privileged private companies. Several other incentives – ranging from tax exemptions, to free allocation of land and buildings, to credit facilities, to provisions for the purchase of domestically produced rather than imported goods for the needs of the state – were given to domestic entrepreneurs to achieve national industrialization. After 1929 (when the Lausanne provisions against custom protection were eliminated), tariff protection was also added to those measures (Boratav 2008, Bugra 1994). Hence, thanks to these incentives, protectionist policies, and a certain ad hoc favoritism of the political elite, a new Turkish business class began to flourish in the first two decades of the Republic.
Ayse Bugra’s (1994) analysis of the Turkish business tycoons’ autobiographies sheds further light on how allegiance and indebtedness to the state have been procured and sustained among the national bourgeoisie in Turkey. Life stories of Haci Omer Sabanci and Vehbi Koc, whose holdings were established in the 1920s and hold more than 10% of Turkey’s GDP today, provide an excellent illustration in this regard.

Haci Omer Sabanci was a semi-illiterate villager with an entrepreneurial spirit from the central Anatolian town of Kayseri. He went to Adana in the 1920s - a relatively rich province in the cotton growing Mediterranean region of Anatolia, which is known to be an Armenian-majority town, before the 1915 genocide. Like many villagers and workers across Turkey, Haci Omer was attracted by the opportunities provided by cotton farming and industry, which were directly subsidized by the state (Boratav 2008, Tekeli and Ilkin 2004). Also many wealthy entrepreneurs were led to the once non-Muslim majority towns like Adana by the possibility of taking over the real estate, commercial and industrial establishments “abandoned” after the emigration and annihilation, of their Greek or Armenian owners. According to the “Abandoned Properties Law”, enacted by the CUP in 1915 and inherited by their Republican successors, the property left behind by non-Muslims (mainly Armenians and Greeks) was “administered” (in fact, seized) by the state, which liquidated them based on certain priorities, including their distribution among Turkish Muslim population (Akcam and Kurt 2015). New Turkish/Muslim immigrants from the Balkans and Caucasus and those who had connections with the government (entrepreneurs as well as state officials at all levels) particularly benefitted from these “opportunities.” As Bugra (1994) suggests, Haci Omer was too modest to have such connections and to be delegated responsibility in the mission of the so-called “indigenization” (nationalization) of the economy. Nevertheless, he took his share from the old non-Muslim-run enterprises indirectly,
through his ties of “fellow townsmen-ship” which can be very important in Turkey, and acquired a few small artisanal production units in Adana (Bugra 1994: 82).

However, the turning point in Haci Omer’s entrepreneurial achievements corresponds to the World War II years. It is during this era that he purchased his first industrial enterprise of some significance, a cotton-based vegetable oil producing factory. The story of his acquisition of this venture is an interesting one. The protectionist, statist policies of the Republic, which marked the pre-war years between 1930 and 1939, had yielded results and led to an unprecedented growth in flour, sugar and cotton producing industries. However, World War II brought about abrupt economic stagnation throughout the country. Although Turkey did not join the war, conscription of a majority of the adult male population led to a stark fall in production. Combined with a significant increase in military expenditures, this fall in agricultural and industrial production increased state budget deficits (Boratav 2008). Moreover, the shortage in the supply of basic consumer goods resulted in wartime profiteering, leading the government to take extraordinary measures during this period.

The infamous Wealth Levy (Varlik Vegisi, also known as Capital Tax) enacted in 1942 (but not implemented until 1944) is one of these extraordinary measures. The officially-stated purposes of the Wealth Levy were to curb black market activities, tax incomes derived from wartime profiteering and secure funds to eliminate government budget deficit, and the law was formally neutral in the imposition of tax requirements on citizens. However, the law targeted some Muslim businessmen who were not on good terms with Ankara (Bugra 1994: 114) as well as the fortunes of the remaining non-Muslim populations (including Armenians, Greeks, and Jews). A capital tax led to a total shattering of the economic position of non-Muslim minorities, who still occupied an important place in Turkey’s commercial life at the time (Bugra 1998, Cetinoglu 2012).
The amount of taxation imposed on non-Muslims was many times that of Muslim Turks\textsuperscript{26}. Moreover, the tax was to be paid in a few days following the notice and there was no possibility of an appeal. If a non-Muslim citizen was unable to pay the imposed Capital Tax, his property was liquidated by the state. And those non-Muslim tax debtors, whose liquidated property fell short in paying the tax were arrested and sent to camps in Eastern Anatolia (Askale, Erzurum) where they were forced to work under adverse environmental conditions\textsuperscript{27}.

Many loyal Turkish Muslim entrepreneurs benefitted enormously from the liquidation of non-Muslim property, and Haci Omer was no exception. Before the Capital Tax years, he had attempted to purchase a cotton-oil producing factory owned by a Russian Jewish entrepreneur. Failing to do so, he had built another plant beside the former. Following the imposition of Capital Tax, the Russian Jewish industrialist had to sell his factory with a huge discount to Haci Omer and his partners, who then successfully eliminated their principal competitor (Bugra 1998: 83).

The Turkish state’s “encouragement” to Turkish Muslim entrepreneurs like Haci Omer Sabanci continued in the post World War II years, this time in more direct ways. The 1950s marked a significant shift in the Turkish political scene and economic policies. In 1946 the single party rule of the CHP was eliminated in favor of a multi-party electoral system. The Democratic Party (“Demokrat Parti,” DP) was founded in the same year by Celal Bayar (the ex-Minister of Population, Development and Resettlement, who broke off from CHP in 1945) and rose to power in 1950, with the leadership of Adnan

\textsuperscript{26} A survey of the Capital Tax paid by non-Muslim and Muslim groups illustrates this disparity. According to the survey, while the rate taxation imposed on Muslim Turks’ recorded wealth was 4.94\%, this rate was 156\% for Jews, 179\% for Greeks and 232\% for Armenians (Bali 2005: 325).

\textsuperscript{27} During the two years the Capital tax law was in effect, more than 1400 non-Muslim citizens were sent to Askale and 24 died from adverse environmental and work conditions as well as from punishment (Cetinoglu 2012: 21). Also see Biberyan (2013) and Karakoyunlu (2010) novels on the impacts of Capital tax on Armenian and Jewish citizens, respectively.
Menderes, a landowner from the central Aegean region of Turkey. Portraying itself as
the champion of people (in contrast to the elitist CHP), the right-wing DP’s main
promise was economic development in a way to improve the living conditions of larger
segments of the population. To this end, DP embraced a more liberal economic outlook
(compared to the statist policies of the prior era): by promoting free trade, encouraging
private business, especially import-oriented ones, and fostering the spirit of profit and
rent-seeking activity. Nevertheless, the state’s involvement in the economy by no means
diminished in this era of defining liberalism (1946-1960). The DP sought to create its own
patronage networks through extremely intricate mechanisms of intervention (Boratav

In the pro-business context of the late 1950s, Haci Omer Sabanci’s industrial
achievements took another turn. Bugra (1994) narrates the rise of the Sabanci group in
these years as follows:

“One of the largest industrial ventures of the Sabanci group, the BOSSA textile
factory, originated in this period during a visit of Celal Bayar, then the president
of the country, to Adana. The visit appeared to be partly planned to search for an
entrepreneur to build a textile factory in this cotton-growing region. Identified as
the right person for the project, Haci Omer founded this factory with a well-
known family of Adana. The investment was financed by a very important credit
from the Turkish Industrial Development Bank with the sponsorship of the
World Bank. (...) After the foundation of BOSSA, the family founded many other
enterprises in the textile industry and moved eventually to other sectors,
sometimes with the direct suggestion and encouragement of the government”

The Sabanci group continued to grow in the following years of relative liberalism
and the planned economy era between 1960 and 1980. During this period, Sabanci
attained its success mainly by eliminating competitors (except the Koc group, which I
cover below). However, as Bugra (1994: 85) points out, this competition took place not in
the market but in the ministries and government offices. “It is, in other words, on the
basis of the sovereignty of the state, and not that of the consumer, that such issues were
settled.” In the post-1960 coup d’état years, Sabancı also built rapport with high-level military officers and gave some of them prominent positions on the boards of directors of Sabancı companies, which helped the smooth functioning of his business operations in consecutive military takeovers.

Vehbi Koc’s story is less sensational, yet as telling as Haci Omer Sabancı’s about the reasons why the Turkish bourgeoisie is said to “eat the bread of the state.” When the Republic was founded, Vehbi Koc was a 15 year-old high school dropout, running a small family grocery store in Ankara, the new capital. Based on Koc’s autobiography, Bugra suggests the following reading of the emergence of Koc Holding:

“He was able to expand the family business in retailing, basically catering to the needs of bureaucrats as individuals and, later, by getting involved as a contractor in government projects. In the 1920s, he got involved in the importing and distributing of oil and gas and, later, of motor vehicles. The success of these ventures was closely related to the growth of Ankara as the capital of modern Turkey. Koc was, in other words, at the right place at the right time, and was able to form the right connections from the outset” (Bugra 1994: 77).

Growing his business on the basis of government contracts, Koc’s main source of capital accumulation was commission from import deals, particularly “the importation of trucks for the government during WWII with a commission of 90% on retail value” (Bugra 1998: 78). His close contacts with the state (government officials and the members of CHP) were central to his attaining such deals. In fact, Vehbi Koc had become a member of CHP, and maintained his official affiliation until 1950, when he was forced to resign by the ruling Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti – DP) of the time. Bugra’s narration of Vehbi Koc’s resignation from CHP is of particular significance in understanding the extent of patronage relations between the Turkish businessmen and the state, hence the procurement of allegiance and indebtedness to the state.

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28 Throughout its history, Turkish “democratic” politics has been suspended by four coup d’etats in 1960, 1972, 1980 and 1997, the second and the fourth in the form of memorandums by the military.
“Some of the most interesting pages of the autobiography are the ones in which Koc relates to this incident [resignation from CHP] and the ways he was affected by it. He was, by then, already the most important businessman in the country, and he shared with many other businessmen of the era the concern for the highly uncertain business environment created by the discretionary economic decisions and highly erratic policy changes of the government in power. Although he probably appreciated the pro-business ideological stand of the DP, he had no desire to change his party to which he was attached by many ties of gratitude. Yet, he also knew – perhaps better than anyone else – the significance of the state support for business success and, consequently, could not resist in the face of open threats of the ruling party. In his autobiography, he acknowledges that his resignation was a cowardly act. He even writes that his wife and daughters refused to speak to him for some time after the event. He seems to have understood and shared their sentiments” (Bugra 1994: 78)

Throughout the history of Turkish Republic, Turkish bureaucrats and big bourgeoisie have enjoyed many privileges. Whereas these generous endowments may be considered a significant factor in the deep sense of indebtedness to the state that is common among many members of these social classes, this indebtedness cannot simply be understood in terms of voluntary gratitude felt towards the state. Another factor, a constant threat of violence and dispossession, should also be taken into consideration in accounting for the development of this particular moral, economic and political relationship with the state. It is true that this systematic violence and dispossession exerted on the potentially disobedient (to the political elite) provides many Turkish officials and entrepreneurs with vast opportunities and advantages. Nonetheless, it is a threat that also hangs over them, at least to an extent, forcing them to yield to the politico-economic demands of the sovereign, even if these demands are against their wishes. It is in this regard that the relationship between the Turkish state and its citizens, even if these citizens are of privileged classes, should be understood in terms of debt and subjugation it entails, rather than gratefulness for endowments, hence mere consent. Now I will turn to less privileged social strata of Turkey to demonstrate how this authoritarian debt dynamic which is based on a constant oscillation between generous giving and forceful taking (or threat thereof) shapes their relations with the state and political subjectivities, hence positions, in more intense ways.
2.3.2. Turkish Peasants and Workers

Both in the first decade of the Republic (until 1929) when more liberal economic policies were implemented and during the following étatist era (1930-1939), peasants and workers were relatively marginalized in the Turkish economy vis-à-vis industry and the increasing economic and political power of state functionaries. The Turkish economy had emerged devastated from World War I and the War of Independence, especially the labor force. Agricultural labor (which constituted the majority of the labor force then) had decreased 20%, both due to the perishing of a significant portion of the male population and to the expulsion and annihilation of Greeks and Armenians, most of whom were peasants, engaged to varying degrees in commercial agriculture (producing export crops such as figs, raisins, tobacco and cotton). Also the working class before the war was mainly composed of non-Muslim populations (around 85%, similar to the composition of the late Ottoman bourgeoisie) (Inalcik and Quataert 1994, Quataert and Zurcher 1995). Although this decrease in population and labor power was compensated for by the inflow of Muslim immigrants from the Balkans and the Caucasus, who were skilled farmers and endowed with land and other aid by the state, state policies at the time were aimed at the building of Turkish industry and the bourgeoisie, and imposed new direct taxes on agriculture (to say nothing of the 1929 economic crisis), diminished the relatively more stable economic conditions of peasants.

Those who were engaged in commercial production were less affected by these developments (until the 1929 crisis), mainly because of the greater involvement of foreign capital and the rapid emergence of the Muslim merchants (thanks to protectionist policies). However, petty producers who relied on subsistence farming on their small lands experienced a significant downfall in their income and had to sell their means of production (oxen and sometimes land) to compensate their losses and pay
their debts. Despite the rise in wheat prices, which was a direct result of the establishment of the state-led Office of Soil Products (Toprak Mahsulleri Ofisi) in 1936, agricultural output declined drastically during these years, until this decline was compensated for in the 1950s (Keyder 1987).

Workers’ economic conditions were little better than peasants’. The growth in manufacture did not reflect in wages. On the contrary, as a result of the rise in unemployment and inflation in the aftermath of the 1929 crisis, the cost of living went up to 247% while wages increased only 114%, and real wages decreased by 40% between 1934 and 1938. Whereas the loss of employment and diminishing wages led to workers’ protests and frequent strikes, these labor movements were immediately suppressed by the state (Ahmad 1995, Yavuz 1995). The single-party regime of the CHP, which came to power in 1931 and assumed the responsibility to rule in the name of the nation is key in understanding this relatively easy suppression of labor movements during these earlier periods of the Republic. Adhering to populist principles, the ruling elite had declared itself the patron of the underclasses. The previously-mentioned saying of Mustafa Kemal’s (“The Republic is the benefactor of the poor/abandoned”) and the “Peasant is the master of the nation” (“Koylu milletin efendisidir”) attest to this populism. Nevertheless, this populist agenda was based on a nationalist ideology, which was attentive to possible divisions within the nation, and was aimed at “establishing social order and solidarity instead of class struggle” (Yapi Kredi 1998: 15). In the face of socio-economic differentiation among the population, the Turkish ruling elite and intellectuals (especially the Kadro movement and magazine) promoted a view which defined the Turkish nation/society not on the basis of separate and contested social classes but by different occupation groups that operate in solidarity for the well-being of the nation (Yapi Kredi 1998). Within such a constellation – emphasizing the political and economic
consolidation of the nation – there was no room for open protest or for movements or organizations based on class interest (or on ethnic or religious identity). Thereby, along with the suppression of ethnic (Kurdish) and religious (anti-secular) unrest, the state was also intolerant towards labor movements and quickly promulgated measures and laws prohibiting them, such as fingerprinting all Istanbul workers in 1932 and enacting a new labor law in 1936 which was based on fascist Italy’s 1935 law and consonant with the new ideology of solidarity in the service of the state (Keyder 1987).

Although the political elite’s and the nascent bourgeoisie’s joining forces under the pretext of building a national economy and sustaining economic independence and development exacerbated the oppression of the working class and the exploitation of the peasants in the first two and a half decades of the Republic, the end of the war constituted a fundamental break in Turkish history. Turkey had remained neutral until the end of the war when it joined the Axis powers led by Germany in 1945. Nevertheless, it succeeded to get a share of Marshall Plan aid (provided by the US to rebuild European economies) in 1947. Simultaneously, and in direct response to American critics’ misgivings about the undemocratic measures of the Turkish state, especially those of the single-party regime, the government announced the need for a multi-party system and the holding of elections in 1946.

The elections resulted in the CHP’s losing its majority in parliament and being reduced to a minor opposition. The right-wing, liberal and populist DP won the majority of the votes and became the new governing party. DP sustained its success in the ensuing elections in 1950, which enabled the party to implement its pro-market, liberal developmentalist and new populist agenda, which was marked by a rhetoric of “going

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29 Turkey’s strategic geographical position in the Cold War world (the only non-Socialist block, capitalist neighbor of the Soviet Union) became instrumental in this regard.
to the people.” The new government quickly abandoned the étatist policies of the prior era and, with the help of Marshall Plan aid, assumed the role of developing the country through enhancing its economic integration into the world market. To this end, the ruling DP undertook various infrastructural projects (especially building roads to create a transportation network to integrate the underdeveloped regions into the economy) and directly or indirectly attempted to ameliorate the working conditions of the peasantry and the proletariat.

As for the peasants, post World War II state support to agriculture took a more direct character. The ‘land reform’ legislated in 1945 has a particular significance in this regard. The reform prescribed the redistribution of land (mainly state land), especially in favor of petty producers. In fact, land reform was designed by the bureaucratic circles and put in practice during the single-party rule of the CHP, which sought to forge a new alliance with the poorer peasantry against the growing significance of the bourgeoisie that began to demonstrate discontent with government policies and form an opposition. Although the DP leaders, representing this new bourgeois fraction, initially opposed the new land policy, it was nonetheless implemented in 1960, during which 342,000 peasant families received land (Bugra 1998, Keyder 1987). As discussed above, since Ottoman times, a majority of the peasantry had demonstrated an independent character. Petty producers had their own land which limited sharecropping activities and the presence of landlords (with the exception of Cukurova, inner Aegean and Kurdish regions, the latter of which will be discussed in Chapter 3). Hence, land reform resulted in the extension of peasant property (around 20% more land) through the hand of the state.

The DP government also shifted its attention to the agricultural sector to enhance the economic conditions of this constituency, which lived mostly in villages (rural population was at around 70% of the entire population). American aid became
instrumental in this regard. Promoting Turkey’s integration into the world market through agricultural exports, both American aid officials and DP politicians aimed at complementing rural development through the provision of cheap credits and the building of an extensive road network to facilitate the marketization of agricultural products. During the 1950s, the number of tractors (acquired mainly by cheap credits) and the total area sown increased 430% and 50% respectively which, combined with favorable weather conditions, resulted in a 183% increase in agricultural production (Keyder 1987). Given the significant role of the state in distributing cheap credits and political patronage mechanisms in determining the creditworthiness of borrowers, Turkish peasants were integrated into the national economy and tied to the state through mechanisms of debt (both financial and political).

The redistribution of state land, cheap credit schemes, and enhanced transportation networks also contributed to the geographical and social mobility of the peasantry – of a fast urbanization – which in turn led to the growth of the working population in Turkey. Given new incentives provided to the agricultural sector, such an increase in urbanization and proletarianization may be considered a counter-intuitive case. However, further analysis of the conditions that gave rise to such development sheds light on the issue. Unlike the proletarianization process in England (Marx 1990), this development in Turkey in the 1950s did not result from the enclosure of land by landlords but rather from the opening up of state land and state-provided incentives to petty producers. Given the particular composition of the rural population in Turkey (consisting mainly of landed peasants instead of landlords), these endowments and incentives led to the relative enrichment of petty producers (again with the exception of the Kurdish regions, where landlords contributed to the containment of populations, Chapter 3). Together with expanding production and the acquisition of motor vehicles,
which lessened the need for manual labor, secondary employment became more prevalent among the peasantry, especially among younger male members of peasant families. In other words, peasants migrating to urban areas were not pushed out of countryside because of landlessness or poverty. They were drawn away by the appeal of new commodities and modernity.

For these new Turkish proletariat, the booming construction sector (thanks to the state’s infrastructural investments), expanding services, and growing state-sponsored industry became important sources of employment after 1954. They lived in cities, especially in the newly emerging shanty towns, and travelled to the village only during harvest season. Although these shanty towns were initially illegal settlements built on state land, it did not take long for the politicians to promise and then deliver civic amenities and municipal services (such as water and paved roads). Endowment of titles to the land by the state soon followed, and combined with the immigrants investing their urban earnings in housing, original shacks assumed the character of sturdy permanent housing (Keyder 1987, Isik and Pinarcioğlu 2008). The new proletariat had not cut their relations with the villages though. The average migrant had a claim to some land in his village which he had rented out or left to a family member in exchange for some compensation (known as icar in Turkish). He also continued receiving supplies from the village, which reduced his family’s basic consumption expenditures. This amalgamation of agrarian structure and endowment of state land exerted an upward pressure on urban wages. The average migrant did not arrive and live in cities destitute. “The marginal product of the rural migrant was certainly not high, but he always had the option of remaining in the countryside with a guaranteed average product, and sharing the household’s income. Wages in the city therefore had to be high enough to
induce the peasant – who was not pushed out – to accept urban employment” (Keyder 1987: 159-60).

The 1960 coup d’état, which overthrew the DP government, opened up new prospects for the working class. The coup is generally regarded as an attempt for the relatively discredited bureaucratic class to re-establish itself in the polity. Hence, a set of new political and economic measures were in order, including the writing of a new and more liberal constitution and also various socio-economic reforms. The economic policy of the era (from 1960 to the 1980 coup d’état) was defined as import-substituting industrialization accompanied by extensive state planning. The policy aimed at the development of the national economy through protectionism. Similar to the pre World War II étatist era, during the 1960s and 1970s, industry took precedence over other sectors. The state actively encouraged domestic industrial growth by building and strengthening State Economic Enterprises (“Kamu Iktisadi Teşekülleri,” or KITs) and protecting the local industrial sector from foreign competition (mainly through restrictions on international trade tariffs and regulation of exchange rates) and providing private enterprises with subsidies and tax rebates. These policies initially revitalized domestic industry and also the internal market. On the one hand, larger scale, import-substituting industrialists, enjoying good relations within bureaucratic circles, especially benefitted from these state-provided privileges. On the other hand, this trend led to the proliferation of new job opportunities in urban areas (especially in the hinterlands of Istanbul, Izmir and Adana/Mersin), and increased urbanization and the growing of the working class.

Import substitution and protectionist policies also opened room for the KITs and the private sector to assume a monopolistic or oligopolistic character, with dominance in the internal market. Due to the exchange rate policies’ curbing of exports, an increase in
their profits and further development of domestic industry became more and more contingent on the growth of the internal market. Industrialists were more willing to share a portion of their increasing profits with the workers, hence there was an increase in the real wages of workers in large industries during this era. Also the state played a significant role in the fostering of internal markets. The 1960 Constitution had granted the workers more extensive political and social rights. Inscription of the right to unionization and to strike in the Constitution is a significant instance of this expansion of rights. Another manifestation of this is the state’s granting social security guarantees, such as pensions and health care services and benefits, to the wage- and salary-earning classes (first to civil servants and then to workers). All in all, these developments enhanced the working classes’ negotiating power and increased their prosperity (specifically those who were employed by large industries and KITs in metropolitan areas, while small manufacturers and their employees in Anatolia only marginally benefitted from these state-led industrialization measures).

This beneficial trend, stimulated under state tutelage and favoring especially the large urban industries and working classes, was interrupted by adverse global and national political-economic dynamics in the mid-1970s (Keyder 1987). The military had intervened in Turkish parliamentary politics in 1971 once again, and interfered with the political and civil rights enjoyed by the working class, university students, and intellectuals – who had started organizing and questioning the material conditions of production, as well as state policies, thus increasing their influence in Turkish politics. Despite the fact that parliamentary democracy was soon re-established and the new CHP government, now under Bulent Ecevit, began to espouse a social democratic agenda to appease popular discontent (Yoruk 2012), this was a shaky rule based on a parliamentary minority. After a short tenure, the CHP government was replaced by a
coalition of, this time, right-wing parties, which sought a populist agenda especially toward the rural populations, disadvantaged by the import-substituting industrialism of that era. Moreover, the 1973 oil crises, increasing state budget deficits, and Turkey’s invasion of Northern Cyprus, which resulted in the imposition of international sanctions soon, led to an economic crisis at home. Together with economic stagnation, the mid-1970s witnessed intense political rivalry and the polarization of society between leftist and fascist (Turkish nationalist and anti-communist) camps.

It did not take long for the military to assume the role of custodians of state tradition and intervene in politics under the pretext of maintaining order and protecting the national unity of the country. The 1980 coup d’état overthrew the elected coalition government, and the parliament and the new junta suspended all political and civil rights, banned all political activities including parties, unions and strikes, and arrested, tortured and led to the “disappearance” of hundreds of thousands who were deemed traitors. Many civil servants and workers lost their jobs for engaging in what were referred to as “terrorist” activities. The Turkish bourgeoisie, which was created under state tutelage at the expense of non-Muslims and matured under conditions of state-induced capitalism, remained silent in the face of these developments (Keyder 1987). Their indebtedness and dependence on the Turkish state were so established that they had to comply with the whims of the state and prioritize national interests over private economic interests and their relatively more liberal tendencies. The military intervention also demonstrated that political and social rights, and economic privileges granted by the state, are contingent on subservience and allegiance to the state – and can easily be retracted the state so decides. As I will detail in Chapter 3, the following era would be marked by a neo-liberal authoritarianism which increasingly curbed social rights as well as collective organizing. This dynamic economically and politically dispossessed many
and rendered them more dependent on the benevolence of the state, specifically in the form of welfare hand-outs, exacerbating the debt relationship between the state and these underprivileged citizens.

Before getting at the making of the indebted citizen within the state-sponsored welfare bureaucracy (Chapter 3), I will now turn to the Kurdish region where another, a counter debt-obligation logic marks the relationships between the Turkish state and Kurdish citizens and among the Kurdish society.
3. “Paying the Price”: Debts of the State, Obligations of Being a Kurd

Some of you were induced by personal egoism, others by foreign counsel and political jealousies. But all of you motivated by the purpose to set up an independent Kurdish state started the revolt. Upon the scaffold you shall pay the price.

—President of Turkish Tribunals of Independence, which tried Sheikh Said and other Kurdish rebels in 1925

Kurdish people want to live on their own lands equally and without fear—just like other honorable people. They want what was stolen, usurped from them.

—Selahattin Demirtas, co-chair of HDP

Write on my gravestone: “He died indebted to his people.”

—M. Hayri Durmus, Member of the PKK’s Central Committee

With the end of the peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK in July 2015, bedel (paying the price) rhetoric has yet again dominated the political scene in Turkey. In the discourse of Turkish authorities, bedel has become a threat to those who challenge the state and establishment. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has not missed any opportunity of deploying the idiom, demonstrating a remarkable skill in associating bedel with the Turkish nation-state’s sovereignty and the necessity of securing Turkish national values and the territorial integrity of the country. “When we consider the developments in the last one and a half years, we have been going through

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30 This epigraph is from a note entitled “The Case of Kurdistan against Turkey” that was presented to the League of Nations by a prominent Kurdish notable and intellectual, Sureya Bedir Khan (1927). Sheikh Said and other Kurdish notables started the first Kurdish rebellion against the newly founded Turkish Republic in 1925. Upon the suppression of the revolt, Kurdish leaders were tried in one of the infamous Turkish special courts-martial known as Tribunals of Independence in Diyarbakir. This is an excerpt from the speech of the president of the Turkish court that he delivered in summing up the case.

31 Excerpt from Selahattin Demirtas’s 2016 Newroz speech in Diyarbakir (Sputniknews 2016).

32 Mehmet Hayri Durmus is said to have made this statement in the notorious Diyarbakir Prison in 1982 during the hunger strike held by the PKK’s imprisoned cadres, which resulted in the death of Durmus along with other prominent PKK cadres including Kemal Pir, Akif Yilmaz and Ali Cicek.
a period of continuous struggle [war on terror],” he stated in a public speech that he
delivered before a soccer game in Istanbul in December 2016:

But I believe that our police, soldiers, village guards and this nation will unite
and become one and put an end to this terror. We just need to be one, be brothers
and be Turkey altogether. And my request from my nation is this. We are one
nation. Turk, Kurd, Abkhaz, Bosnian, one nation...80 million, one nation. We
have one flag. It is in the color of our martyrs’ blood with its crescent being a
symbol of our independence and each star a martyr. What makes a flag is the
blood of martyrs. Land becomes a motherland only if there are people who are
willing to die for it. [Some say] the Southeast [the Kurdish region] will be
governed differently, another place differently...[If you say this] you will pay
the price of it! You are already paying the price! Seven hundred eighty thousand
square kilometers is one motherland, one state. We have no other state than the
Turkish Republic. (beyazgazete.com 2016; My translation. Emphasis mine.)

The Kurdish-led HDP and activists have not remained silent in the face of these
threats from Tayyip Erdogan and other Turkish authorities who, on every occasion,
pledged to make them pay the price. In their public speeches and meetings, they
responded to these threats by re-appropriating and deploying bedel rhetoric, albeit in a
totally different sense. In the discourse of the Kurdish movement, bedel has come to
signify both the losses of the people of Turkey (especially the Kurds, but also other
oppressed) through state violence and oppression and the sacrifices that have been
made and should be made for the resistance and the liberation of all. “A difficult process
is ahead of us,” Selahattin Demirtas, co-chair of the Kurdish-led HDP (“Halkin
Demokrasi Partisi,” People’s Democracy Party) and an MP, began in an official party
meeting held in the Turkish Parliament. He continued:

We are people who have a cause. If we unite around our beliefs, values, if we
struggle to build peace, if we struggle on the streets, in the fields and factories,
we will make a difference. [In this struggle] You will never see a trace of
hesitation in our eyes. We will not even blink, let alone go down on our knees.
There are Armenians, Assyrians, Arabs, Turks, Kurds, women, youth, academics
among us. We represent the peoples of Turkey. Whatever its price is, we will
pay for it. We will not allow them to make our people pay the price. We will not
allow any killings—of those on the mountains, policemen, soldiers. We have
been empowered by our people and are ready to pay the price [bear the costs of
the struggle]. As long as we do not forget what sentiments brought us together in
HDP, peace will win in Turkey, freedom will win in Turkey. We will stand
upright. We will save Turkey from the AKP junta, from the palace [Erdogan’s
palace] junta. We will stop them. We will not let you [Erdogan] make war in this
country. (IMC 2015; My translation. Emphasis mine.)
“Bedel ödemek” is a curious Turkish idiom. Just like its English counterpart, “paying the price,” it signifies both economic exchange and the necessity of bearing the consequences of an action. However, in Turkey, its political significance goes well beyond these common usages, constituting the crux of the conflict between the Turkish state and Kurds. Even a brief look at the nuances between Turkish state authorities’ phrasing of the idiom (“You shall/will pay the price”) and those of the Kurds (“We paid the price,” “We are ready to pay the price”) tells us a lot about the power dynamics, contesting political outlooks, interpretations of history and politico-economic claims that inform the Kurdish question in Turkey.

This chapter will trace the genealogy of bedel in the Kurdish region in order to account for the particular political, economic and moral relationship between the Turkish state and its Kurdish citizens. The chapter starts with an overview of the history of political and economic dispossession of the region—a peculiar region that the state could not fully penetrate for centuries. This section will illustrate how centralization and nation-building policies of the Turkish state (which in fact date back to the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire) took their toll on the subaltern Kurdish population, further marginalizing and disenfranchising them. The section that follows focuses on Kurdish activism from the 1960s to late 1970s. Here I will show how these activists revived the history of political and economic dispossession of the Kurdish region, hence reframing the Kurdish question in terms of loss and deprivation and making counter-debt claims from the state. In the final section, I will turn to the contemporary Kurdish resistance and demonstrate how the new and radical political outlook of the PKK, which introduced a subaltern perspective and a new set of vocabulary and practices into the struggle, such as occupation, colonization, oppression, decolonization, liberation, resistance and guerrilla warfare, reconfigured the political space in the Kurdish region.
This political outlook, as I will explain in detail, has not only reinforced the counter-debt claims of Kurds on the state but also introduced new obligations (to resist oppression and pursue liberation at all costs) on the members of the Kurdish community. Bedel ödemek (as an idiom and practice) has become the marker of these counter-debts and obligations, redefining the Kurdish political identity along the lines of both loss and sacrifice. Therefore, I suggest, bedel ties the Kurdish community together through a debt–obligation relationship, but in a way that negates the debt relationship enforced by the Turkish state. In contrast to the Turkish state’s debt morality, which procures loyalty and subservience to the state through a dialectic of violence and benevolence, Kurdish bedel promotes resistance at all costs (to the state and all sorts of subjugation) and self-determination (both at collective and individual levels), enabling the emergence of alternative socialities and subjectivities that constitute a challenge to the Turkish state’s sovereign power in the region.

### 3.1. Political and Economic Dispossession of the Kurdish Region

It is said that there hangs a brass plate in front of the Turkish Parliament and another behind its great chief’s desk. These plates read: “Sovereignty belongs to the nation.” We haven’t seen it. From the valleys of the Kızılırmak River to the slopes of Agri [Ararat Mountain], another notice pierces the eastern provinces: “Sovereignty belongs to the gendarme.” We see this with our own eyes… This is the case because there [in western Turkey] the Turkish bourgeois ruling class can still deceive and tame hardworking Turkish masses through the demagogy of “nation.” But here [in the East], because of the impossibility of Turkifying the Kurds, theft and appropriation have to happen openly, mainly by sheer force.

—Hikmet Kivilcimli

Throughout history, Kurdistan has demonstrated some peculiar characteristics in terms of both its political, administrative and economic integration into the main ruling states in the Middle East and its social organization. Its mountainous geography, which

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33 The great chief (or reis in Turkish) refers to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in this context.
34 Kivilcimli (1937): 78
renders many parts of the region impassable to traditional armies, and its presence as a frontier zone between contesting empires and states, have been factors that impeded the centralized states’ full penetration and control until the nineteenth century, when generally amicable relations between the Kurdish notables and Ottoman state began to shatter.\footnote{The particular way of Kurdistan’s incorporation into the Ottoman Empire may be considered a significant factor in the region’s maintaining a relatively autonomous status for centuries. Unlike other territories of the empire, Kurdistan’s integration was not secured by conquest. The confrontation between the strong multi-ethnic Ottoman and Persian states had intensified in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was the Kurdish region where this confrontation took place, so Kurdish tribes and chieftains naturally played an important role during this conflict. The local notables’ influence on their warrior tribesmen and capacity to control this frontier zone made them important actors in determining the fate of the war (van Bruinessen 1992: 143). The Kurdish mirs’ support and allegiance to the Ottoman Empire were not unconditional, though. In return for their submission to the sultan, they were granted political and administrative privileges unseen in the rest of the empire. The Kurdish territories that were incorporated into the empire were divided into three provinces (eyalets), which were officially under the jurisdiction of the central Ottoman state. Nonetheless, the administrative organization of these Kurdish provinces demonstrated some significant differences from that of other (western) provinces and constituted an exception to the highly centralized Ottoman rule. Some districts within these Kurdish provinces, generally the most inaccessible ones, were left fully autonomous. These autonomous districts were called Kurd hukumeti (Kurdish government) and governed by Kurdish ruling families, who retained their hereditary rights to rule. Their land was not made into state property, and they owed neither tribute to the central authority nor mandatory military service in the Ottoman Army. The remaining Kurdish territory was divided into sanjaqs (districts). They became estates of the Ottoman Dynasty and were governed by appointed sanjaqbegis. However, integration of even these districts in the Ottoman Empire was very partial. Kurdish sanjaqbegis had the same obligations toward the state that the others had, mainly providing military service and transferring revenue to the central treasury. Nonetheless, Kurdish mirs were allowed to keep a higher proportion of the revenue for themselves and put a smaller proportion of their troops at the disposal of the Ottoman Army. More significant, because of some particular mechanisms of appointment, the rule remained in the Kurdish families. Unlike ordinary Ottoman sanjaqs, where office is temporary and cannot be conferred by inheritance (at least formally), in Kurdish districts only members of the ruling families were eligible for office. Incumbents’ rights to rule could be revoked by state authorities, but in that case, the position had to be given to a son or relative. This particular administrative structure precluded direct state penetration into the region and formation of patronage relations between the local population and the state for three centuries. Although we can talk about the presence of a patronage relationship between the Ottoman state and Kurdish mirs who declared their submission to the sultan, Kurds’ allegiance and obedience had often been dubious. Pitting Ottoman and Persian empires against one another or shifting sides when their interests were threatened had always been among the options of many Kurdish mirs. Although the Kurds displayed such ambivalence in their loyalty to the imperial center, their control over the eastern frontier territories rendered them indispensable to the Ottoman Empire. This balance of power, which granted relative autonomy to the Kurdish region, was maintained until the nineteenth century (McDowall 2003, Izady 1992, Van Bruinessen 1992).} 

As in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, the nineteenth century was a turning point in Kurdistan. Stressed by defeats, territorial losses and economic crises, the empire had lost its strength in the preceding century. Not only had the centralized administrative structure of the Ottoman state shattered and local notables or once-
appointed rulers gained semi-independent characteristics resembling those of feudal
lords of medieval Europe, but secessionist tendencies had emerged across the western,
southern and eastern frontiers of the empire, threatening its territorial integrity. In the
face of these developments, which pushed the empire toward increasing
decentralization, and most probably a premature dissolution, the Ottoman sultans who
succeeded to the throne in the nineteenth century resorted to often draconian
centralization policies (Chapter 2). These policies also affected Kurdistan36, as they
aimed at bringing the Kurdish tribal fringes of the empire under direct state authority
(something that had not been attempted before), and curbed Kurdish autonomy by the
middle of the century.

Such political dispossession of Kurdistan was accompanied by an economic
decline which mainly took its toll on ordinary people of the region. The demise of
Kurdish mirliks (principalities) led to a power vacuum. In the absence of mirs, who once
maintained order and played a conciliatory role among inimical tribes, latent animosities
in the region revived. Intertribal conflicts and feuds exploded, banditry became
widespread, and travel in the region became extremely dangerous. The impact area of
state-appointed governors was restricted to the city centers. Despised and distrusted by
the local population, they were capable of neither mediating conflicts nor imposing rule

36 Egypt’s gaining virtual independence vis-à-vis the Ottoman Porte in the beginning of the nineteenth
century was a significant factor in the rise of centralization efforts by the Ottoman Empire. This
development was read by the Kurdish mirs, who began to display nationalist and secessionist tendencies, as
evidence of the state’s weakness. Hence, some strong Kurdish mirs (in particular, Mir Muhammad of
Rawanduz and Bedr Khan Beg of Botan) undertook actions to enhance their political influence in the region
and started to show signs of independence. Whereas the former attacked his neighbors to expand territorial
control, the principality of Bedr Khan began to further demonstrate state-like characteristics, such as
establishing a relatively modernized army and refusing to send troops when requested during the Ottoman-
Russian war of 1828 to 1829 (McDowell 2003, van Bruinessen 1992). The Ottoman authorities were well
aware of these developments in the region. However, preoccupied with suppressing the uprising in Egypt,
they did not (or could not) intervene immediately. Nonetheless, once Egypt was taken under control and the
Ottomans garnered support from Western powers (especially the British and French), they started an
offensive against the Kurdish mirs, which resulted in the latter’s defeat and replacement by Ottoman
governors.
and order. Economic conditions in Ottoman Kurdistan thus deteriorated during this time, mainly because of the lack of security. Moreover, without the firm grip of mirs, Kurdish tribal chiefs (aghas) became more ruthless in their pursuit of political and economic power, which in turn rendered the majority of the population more vulnerable to oppression and exploitation (McDowell 2003).37

Whereas new legislations and regulations, further introduced by the Ottoman state, were effective in curbing Kurdish notables’ autonomy vis-à-vis the state, they did not break (if not intensified) the economic and political control of the local elite over the population. The land code issued by Abdulmecid I in 1858—as a part of reforms to establish a new system of centralized provincial administration across the territory—is a good example in this regard. Founded on traditional land practices of the Ottoman Empire, this land law was intended to revoke fiefs and make actual cultivators the legal possessors of the land. Reasserting the state’s ultimate ownership of land, the law bestowed and guaranteed possession rights of the users on the condition that they registered their land in a special government agency (tapu office) by paying a small fee. The land code profoundly affected the social and economic structure of Kurdistan, but not in favor of the actual tillers of the soil. A small elite—mainly aghas, along with shaikhs (local clerics), certain classes of townsmen, merchants and state officials who knew how to handle official affairs—abused this land code by registering the land of commoners in their names. This pattern of acquisition impaired the communal dimension of the local economy. While aghas became large landowners, commoners were reduced to tenants, sharecroppers or hired laborers (Gozel 2007, van Bruinessen 1992).

37 Whereas mirs had shown authoritarian tendencies, and some ruled their emirates with an iron hand, they nonetheless kept tribal chiefs (aghas) in check and protected peasants and other ordinary people from excessive exploitation (McDowell 2003)
In this way centralization policies of the Ottoman state, combined with the specific social organization of Kurdistan, contributed to the rise of a new local stratum, aghas (and also shaikhs) with broad political and economic power, which played a significant role in the political containment and economic oppression of Kurdistan’s population. Mainly for security reasons and territorial unity concerns, the Ottoman state intentionally empowered some select tribal leaders by providing them with inordinate political and economic incentives in return for their allegiance and military support. The Hamidiye Light Cavalry (Hamidiye Alaylari), a Kurdish tribal militia or gendarmerie, is a particularly significant example in this regard.

Hamidiye was an irregular militia composed mainly of Kurdish tribes. However, not all Kurdish tribes were incorporated into the militia, even if they wanted to be. Perceived loyalty to the state appears to be the most significant factor in determining which tribe is to be selected for Hamidiye. The relationship between the state and select Kurdish tribes, on the other hand, was one based on conferring of privileges in return for loyalties. The manifestation of allegiance on the part of Kurdish tribes came in the form of surrendering men for the army and revenue for the state treasury. The rewards granted, on the other hand, ranged from exemption from certain taxes and conscription beyond Hamidiye to the state’s honoring tribal leaders through ceremonies held in the Porte (Istanbul) to provision of weapons to Hamidiye tribes to “license to

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38 Hamidiye was established in 1890 by Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) to police the eastern frontiers of the empire. In this era the Ottoman state perceived multiple threats (external and internal) in its eastern region. Along with the chaos after the demise of the Kurdish mirliks, Russia was claiming certain provinces, and Armenian nationalist-revolutionary activity was expanding. Under these circumstances the state turned to Kurdish tribes and “tried to transform them from a local power that was a challenge to state authority into an arm of state authority in order to manage the other ‘threats’” (Klein 2011: 3). Although Hamidiye is generally discussed in terms of its role in the “pacification” of Armenians—through displacement, massacres and finally genocide—it also has significance in accounting for the shifting state–society relations in the region.

39 For instance, whereas some Alevi tribes of Dersim demonstrated willingness to join the cavalry, their appeal was not accepted by the Ottoman provincial authorities.
illegally obtain wealth in various forms with the complicity of the government and little fear of punishment by the law” (Klein 2011: 75). Thereby, Hamidiye appeared to be a way of building a direct patronage relation between the Sultan and Kurdish tribes as well as a military venture to eliminate “threats” and impose order in the region. It rendered the state the protector and source of wealth for the select aghas.

Whereas state endowments provided as a part of the Hamidiye deal benefited and empowered select Kurdish tribes, they nonetheless brought further misery and violence to the majority of the population—mainly Armenians and other non-Muslims, but also rival Kurdish tribes, peasants, nomads and semi-nomads. The military power that Hamidiye tribes procured intensified the sheer violence in the region. Free from punishment by the law, Hamidiye leaders organized offensives against groups whom they perceived as a threat or obstacle to their interests. Moreover, the increased military power and authority of these tribal chiefs provided them with an unprecedented control over economic resources—especially land. Usurping left-behind property of displaced Armenians, land of Kurdish peasants and communal pastures became a common practice among Hamidiye-associated aghas. Although Armenian peasants who were now pushed out of their homeland or already disempowered or criminalized were not in a position to resist these Kurdish aghas, Kurdish peasants tried protesting these illegal practices, but these protests proved to be ineffective. The peasants were too weak to defeat the well-armed tribesmen of the aghas, and appealing to the state to prevent injustices and land-grabbing was not a real option for them (Klein 2011).

As the main mediators between the state offices and commoners, aghas had developed close relations with state officials. Performing duties in Hamidiye further increased their influence in provincial government offices and local armed forces. In addition to turning a blind eye to Hamidiye chiefs’ illegal possession of land and
exerting violence on local people, state officials were often complicit in these activities (Klein 2011). Hence, empowerment of some Kurdish chieftains by the hand of the Ottoman state (especially through Hamidiye) adversely affected the majority of the population in the region. Dispossession of Kurdish commoners reduced them to tenants, whose livelihoods were increasingly dependent on the aghas’ will, thus increasing the authority and economic power of the latter. It was against this backdrop that the state’s “benevolent” endowments—which provided a select few Kurdish strongmen with power, privileges and riches in exchange for their loyalty—were experienced by many Kurds as a form of violence and dispossession that took their lives, freedom and livelihood.

The Ottoman state’s centralization efforts took another turn with the CUP’s rise to power following the 1908 coup against Abdulhamid II. Gradually embracing Turkish nationalism and undertaking the mission of “saving the state,” the CUP adopted a more invasive approach to maintain state control over populations and territories. From now on, ethnic and religious homogenization policies would go hand in hand with administrative and economic reorganization efforts (Chapter 1). Whereas the CUP considered Kurds as a potential threat to the state and initially took action to curb Kurdish aghas’ power, this second effort of the CUP to instate direct rule in the region proved to be ineffective. Political turmoil in the region made Kurdish tribes indispensable to the state. Losing the allegiance of the Kurds might put the eastern territories of the empire at huge risk in the face of Russian and Armenian threats. Therefore, whereas the CUP policies against non-Muslim, non-Turkish citizens were truly exclusionary, in the case of Kurds, these policies took on a more assimilatory character. In order to earn the trust of the state—which was essential to prevent state aggression and maintain political and economic power as the local arm of the state in the
region—Kurdish tribes now had to prove their allegiance not only by providing troops and revenue to the state but also by embracing modern Turkish traits.40

Although this Turkification project could not be strictly implemented within the turmoil of the World War years, they retained their significance in shaping successor Turkish authorities’ approach to the Kurds. In the Republican era, the power and political and economic privileges provided to aghas would be maintained insofar as they embraced Turkishness and collaborated with state authorities in the containment of the Kurdish population.

3.1.1 The Turkish Republic in the Kurdish Region

Kurdish tribes (ashirets) demonstrated their allegiance to the state by fighting for the independence of Turkey against European occupiers and also against Armenians, who claimed part of Kurdish territories within the present Turkish borders. Although the Kemalists who organized the War of Independence initially approached their Kurdish allies with sympathy and promised them an equal standing in the new state, these amicable relations between the Kurds and Turkish ruling elite did not last long. Concessions given to Kurds in the 1921 Constitution issued during the war (in the form of recognition of Kurdish identity and autonomy) were revoked as soon as independence was gained (Yegen 1996). Quickly returning to the Turkish nationalism that they inherited from the CUP, Kemalists set out a program to assimilate or exterminate non-Turkish groups. Whereas Kurds took a milder hit from the iron fist of

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40 As a part of this “civilizing and modernizing” mission, the CUP sought to gradually incorporate Kurds into Turkish society through education and social engineering. For instance, whereas the CUP maintained hereditary posts in Hamidiye Cavalry (called Tribal Light Cavalry after the overthrow of Abdulhamid II), it nonetheless imposed new criteria to regulate recruitment. “The sons of the chiefs had to fill certain requirements in order to be appointed to fill vacancies as they arose: they were to have been prepared in military schools and to have received a diploma, to have obtained certificates upon completion of their probation in regular cavalry, to have been trained in tribal noncommissioned-officer schools … [and] tribal officers would have to read and write Turkish.” (Klein 2011: 110–1)
the Turkish state compared to the non-Muslim populations, they nonetheless lost all autonomy and became subject to policies of denial of their own ethnic presence, assimilation and sheer force\(^\text{41}\).

One of the first interventions of the new Turkish state was to prepare a restructuring plan for the Kurdish region (Sark Islahat Plani—Restructuring Plan for the Orient) in 1925, detailing policies to be implemented to pacify the region and incorporate Kurds into the broader Turkish public. With the plan everything that recalled a separate Kurdish identity (including language, dress, names and tribes) was abolished. Boarding schools (especially for girls) and gendarmerie posts were built to enable state penetration of the Kurdish region and teach Kurds that they were not Kurdish but Turkish citizens. The plan also envisaged demographic restructuring through displacement of Kurds and resettlement of new Turkish immigrants (muhacir) in the Kurdish region. The government put the plan into practice in September 1925 following the suppression of the first great Kurdish revolt in Republican history, Shaikh Said Rebellion in February 1925 (Yegen 1996, Bayrak 2009). Martial law was declared immediately after the rebellion, opening further room for the implementation of the plan. Many Kurdish notables were tried in martial courts and executed or sent to exile. Thousands of tribesmen were deported, and numerous villages were destroyed. The Republic was determined to do away with all forms of indirect rule and fully penetrate the region.

These developments gave rise to grievances among the Kurds. It had now become clear that the Republic was not their Republic, but an exclusively Turkish one.

\(^{41}\) Seeds of these policies had been sown in the preceding CUP era when various officials were sent to Kurdistan to investigate social organization of Kurdish tribes and the political and economic structures of Kurdistan in order to find ways of “integrating” Kurds into the nation. Accordingly, various propagandistic reports had been written by the CUP cadres—under German pen names, interestingly—to provide “scientific” evidence for the Kurds’ Turkish origins (Bayrak 2009).
Kurds’ existence was being denied, and they were left with two difficult choices: accepting assimilation into the Turkish society (as lesser citizens) or resistance. Two other major revolts, Agri/Ararat (1928–31) and Dersim (1937—38) Rebellions, followed. But the state, armed with heavy artillery and a capacity to deploy large troops, showed no mercy. Hundreds of thousands were killed during the revolts, and the region was razed. The Kurdish region’s initial encounter with the Republic was recorded in blood.

The Turkish state’s presence in the region was not limited to sheer force. Through various other measures ranging from imposition of strict border controls to cross-border trade regulations to the establishment of state monopolies, the state further penetrated the region (also socioeconomically) and became a significant actor in the shaping of everyday life. As a modern, independent nation-state founded after the dissolution of an empire, Turkey was very sensitive about protecting its remaining territories. If one way of maintaining territorial integrity, hence independence as a nation, was through security measures, the other, according to the Turkish ruling elite, was through creation and protection of a national (milli) economy (Chapter 2). Finding expression in the Republican motto “Tek vatan, tek pazar” (One homeland, one market), this political outlook manifested itself in the Kurdish region as a devastating shift in socioeconomic structures and intensified exploitation under the guise of state endowments.

3.1.2. Borders and Cross-Border Trade

Traditionally, Kurdistan had an internal market that was less integrated into the western regions of the Ottoman Empire. The most active trade routes in northern (Turkish at the present) Kurdistan were on north–south (between Turkish and Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan) and north–east (between Turkish and Iranian Kurdistan) axes. Northern Kurds, more or less freely, sold their sheep, cattle and produce in the markets
to the south and east and returned with goods such as silk and velvet clothes, carpets, leather shoes, glassware, dates, henna and gas (Besikci 1969, Kivilcimli 1979). New borders drawn in the aftermath of World War I hit this regional economy and mobility strongly. Not only was Ottoman Kurdistan divided between three new political entities (Turkey, French mandate of Syria and English mandate of Iraq), but the Ottoman-Persian border, which was drawn in the early seventeenth century and separated northwestern Kurdistan from its eastern counterpart, was strengthened through watchtowers and checkpoints. All trade activity and cross-border mobility were subjected to strict regulations and restrictions, which hampered the regional economy and criminalized traditional trade activities.

To many Kurds Turkish state borders have meant entrapment, violence, loss and pauperization. These borders have indeed had manifold catastrophic effects in the Kurdish region (Besikci 1969, 2013, Kivilcimli 1979, Ozgen 2003, Bozcali 2014, Ozcan 2014). Let’s begin with the Kurdish herders. Borders hit animal husbandry and trade the harshest. Instead of taking their herds to the closest and best-known markets to the south and east, Kurdish herdsmen now had to risk long and onerous journeys to the national markets in western Turkish cities and ports (especially Trabzon, Mersin and Ankara)\(^\text{42}\).

With the borders a new profession emerged in the region: smuggling, which became the main economic activity for many. Because the availability and prices of many consumer goods differed between parts of Kurdistan, cross-border trade was quite profitable for the locals. However, in order to foster their bourgeoisie, change trade

\(^{42}\) Unfortunately, other than a movie, The Herd (1977), by the famous Kurdish social realist director Yılmaz Güney, details of this “internal” animal trade are yet to be elaborated in the literature. For this reason questions such as how exactly this major shift in trade routes affected Kurds or what Kurdish herdsmen who went on these long journeys to the Turkish markets had to go through still remain unanswered. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that shifting trade routes rendered many economically more vulnerable and also more prone to exploitation.
routes to their advantage or both, the countries that ruled parts of Kurdistan introduced tariffs and restrictions on cross-border trade\(^4\). Under these conditions, for many Kurds (both in Turkey and other parts of Kurdistan), smuggling appeared to be a way of sustaining traditional trading activities and gaining access to more affordable goods.

Other reasons for the prevalence of smuggling in the region were the unavailability of other economic opportunities for many and its profitability for a few. For the majority of the Kurdish population, smuggling was the only option other than tilling agha land as sharecroppers or hired laborers. In spite of the risks—ranging from being killed by soldiers to confiscation of merchandise by state authorities, resulting in huge economic losses—many Kurds got involved in smuggling. Whereas smuggling was another form of exploitation for the underprivileged commoners, the aghas who retained their power through good relations and collaboration with state authorities and had connections with the merchants across the borders profited greatly from it.

Hence, borders contributed to the pauperization of the region, mainly by setting obstacles and criminalizing traditional trade activities. The majority of Kurds, namely the underprivileged commoners, became more susceptible to exploitation by dominant social classes in the region, like the state officials, merchants and aghas—those who were backed up by the state in return for their allegiance and cooperation in suppressing the grievances and protests of the Kurdish popular classes. However, the effects of borders and border controls have not been limited to economic losses. Strengthening of the military infrastructure (like military stations and checkpoints) in border zones also

\(^4\) For instance, in the 1930s, the Syrian government imposed extremely high tariffs on grain from Turkey. Despite the availability and low prices of grain in Turkish Kurdistan, Syria chose to import grain from America at inflated prices. Piles and piles of grain were stocked on the Turkish side of the border, yet exporting them to Syria through legal means was extremely costly. Similarly, consumer and luxury goods were cheaper in Syria. However, in order to sustain the demand for more expensive goods from the growing national (Turkish) industry, the Turkish state imposed restrictions on importing these goods (Kivilcimli 1979).
rendered the local population more susceptible to state violence. Throughout the history of the Republic, countless Kurdish smugglers have been killed or injured by Turkish soldiers.44

3.1.3. The Republic, Aghas and Kurdish Peasants

Turkish popular culture is full of agha stories. From the classics of Turkish fiction to popular movies of the 1960s to 1990s to the top-ranking TV series of the 2000s, agha-tenant relations have been the subject of many cultural materials. Although depiction of aghas has changed from one era to another (from the despotic aghas of the 1960s and 1970s to the poor aghas of the 1980s and 1990s to the rich, urbanized, highly educated, modern and charismatic aghas of the 2000s), this ambivalent figure has occupied a significant place in Turkish imagery. Of course, most of these works have never been explicit about the ethnic origins of this particular kind of landlord. However, in these pop culture forms, it is very likely to find Turkish aghas with Kurdish features, especially names and accents, ruling their fief and people under the tutelage of or in collaboration with state authorities. Even if this hybrid representation of aghas has just a little to say about Kurdish society (in the past or present), it nonetheless tells us a lot about the role and subject position the Turkish state assigned to Kurdish aghas.

As explained previously, aghas gaining dominance in Kurdish society is a recent phenomenon. Although we do not know much about the extent of authority that these tribal leaders enjoyed during the more autonomous Kurdish principalities, it is clear that

44 Among these, the 33 Bullets Incident (33 Kursun Vakası), which resulted in the execution of thirty-three Kurdish smugglers in Van in 1946 by the order of a Turkish general, Mustafa Muglali, is one of the most infamous. Muglali was never tried for extrajudicially killing civilians. On the contrary, he was honored by the Turkish state. His name was given to a military station in Van—Ozalp, the exact place where the incident happened (Besikci 33 Kursun). State violence against Kurdish cross-border traders is not something that remained in the past. On the night of December 28, 2011, thirty-four smugglers, most of them under eighteen, were killed by a military air strike in Roboski (Ulundere), a Kurdish town on the Turkey–Iraq border. The incident raised huge grievances among the Kurds, which found almost no counterpart among the Turkish public. The majority of Turks and the mainstream news media chose to remain silent, and the Turkish authorities referred to the massacre as “collateral damage in the war on terror.”
aghas gained major power after the principalities lost their autonomy as a result of the nineteenth-century centralization policies of the Ottoman Empire (van Bruinessen 1992, McDowell 2006, Besikci 1979). Those Kurdish landlords who were protected and backed up by the Turkish state in exchange for their allegiance gradually increased their political and economic power and played a significant role in the “pacification” of the region by the end of the long nineteenth century. This compromised relationship between Kurdish aghas and the Ottoman state was inherited by the Turkish Republic. Despite the Kemalist elite’s distaste of Kurdish notables and unease with the local power they enjoyed, the fact that the new Turkish state was as incapable as its predecessor of establishing direct rule in the region made loyal aghas the only option to establish rule and order in its eastern peripheries. Many local state authorities (from provincial governors to prosecutors and judges to gendarmerie to petty state officials) helped these aghas further appropriate the commons, expand their land and legitimize their ownership status. As a result, Kurdish aghas who collaborated with the state increased their political influence and wealth.

This covert patronage relationship between the Republic and (loyal) Kurdish aghas took its toll on the subaltern of the Kurdish region, especially the peasants. The process of enclosure, which intensified in the region in the mid-nineteenth century, continued in the twentieth century. The Kemalist elite, with their seemingly republican outlook, undertook some land reform projects that were mainly based on implementation of the 1858 Land Code in certain pilot areas. The kernel of these measures was the sale of state land to private peasants at low prices. Moreover, certain formal restrictions were imposed in order to prevent local notables from buying and
registering the majority of the land in their name\textsuperscript{45}. However, in practice, these policies of land redistribution that were represented as “gifts to peasants” (koyululere armagan) by the Republican elite proved to be a formal mechanism of dispossession for the majority of Kurds. The following anecdote by Hikmet Kivilcimli (1937 [1979]) from the early 1930s provides a detailed portrayal of how Kurdish peasants were further dispossessed by the aghas with the help of state authorities:

Turkish ruling elite did promise land to the peasants of the East, just as it promised land to the western peasants. When [the Turkish state] temporarily exiled some of the [disobedient] Kurdish aghas to the western provinces—upon the Sheikh Said Rebellion—Kurdish peasantry began to quietly appropriate the land for their own use. It was as if the land was communalized, for a brief while. However, the Kemalist bourgeoisie’s intention was not to stop and watch these developments as they evolved. In fact, aghas losing power might have induced an uprising against all sorts of oppression. [Loyal] Aghas were quickly sent back [to the Kurdish region]. And it is at this point that Kemalist intellectuals started to pen pamphlets promoting “gifts to peasants”—a gift which would bring about a new set of disasters.

Scene 1:

[Turkish] Bourgeoisie intended to turn Kurdish aghas into modern landowners and usurers... [According to the new land code] 330 hectares of land would be registered in the name of the agha, and the rest would be sold to the peasantry under the protection of the government...The district governor and inspector go to a village and announce: “Sharecroppers (maraba)! Either buy land, or we will expel you!” If we think for a little while, we will see how this announcement, which might seem terribly “republican” at first, is in fact a dirty and cruel ploy... [The state tells the peasants] “Don’t be afraid of the agha. Buy the land that he sells.” But the agha doesn’t have a liking for long rhetoric. He simply sends a short note to the village: My land is “bone of a snake; whoever eats it shall be choked.” The poor peasants are willing to do anything for a piece of land. [But they don’t have the cash to buy the land]. They make the following proposal to the agha: “[Give us some land]. Instead of paying [the price of land] to the state in twenty-year installments, we will pay the whole amount to you in five years. And in the remaining fifteen years, we will make the installment payments to you.” But even this [unfair deal] does not satisfy the aghas.

Scene 2:

Gendarme lieutenant and the clerk come to the village to register and “distribute” land to the peasants. The clerk is the agha’s cousin [paternal uncle’s son]. Agha hosts them in his house. During a festive dinner, the land registry and distribution process is completed. Three hundred thirty hectares of land is

\textsuperscript{45} No individual was allowed to buy (or register) state land beyond a certain limit (330 hectares, approximately 765 acres).
registered in the agha’s name. Then 3,300 hectares is registered to the agha’s brothers, sons, wife and daughters...But the agha’s lands are so vast that even after this partitioning, there still remains some land (mostly barren). This barren land is sold to the peasants. But not to any peasant, to the agha’s men. That is, to the agha! Finally, the remaining tiny portion of land is sold to landless peasants who are eager to risk everything just to own a piece of land. Now we are in the operation phase. And here we see the Kemalist state and Kurdish aghas making “land reform” hand in hand at a festive dinner.

Scene 3:

Agha’s cousin [the land registry clerk] registers five hectares to each landless peasant. But in fact, the actual land given to each peasant does not exceed three hectares. So the agha makes his first 40-percent pillage with the help of the Kemalist state apparatus. Nevertheless, peasants are willing to take this deal and pay the principal plus interest to the agha for twenty years. Let’s calculate the minimum payment of a peasant then: 8 liras of tax to the state (this is the main aim of the state...because it couldn’t collect this tax from the agha) + 12 liras to the agha = 20 liras in cash per year. [Here Kivilcimli makes some calculations and deduces that a peasant makes 30 liras per year, of which he spends more than half of it to buy seed and for other fixed costs, including an extrajudicial tax paid to the agha]. What will the peasant do then? If he pays the tax to the state and installments to the agha, what will he eat? Won’t he beg the agha to buy his land, or just leave the land and escape? (Kivilcimli 1979: 93–5, my translation)

In this way, during the Republican era, many aghas became the sole owners of land, at least until the 1980s, when the PKK started its offensive against them. In addition to holding full property rights in many villages—where landless peasants resided as tenants, sharecroppers and even subjects of the landlords—aghas also maintained control over small landowners, seemingly free peasants and the landless agricultural workers (ameliye) and often reduced them to tenants through intricate mechanisms explained earlier. Moreover, by building good relations with the local state authorities and the political elite in Ankara, many aghas intensified their political influence in the region and functioned as the hand of the state. They were the ones who acted as intermediaries between the state and commoners, settled conflicts in their areas, provided amnesty from punishment or handed people in to the state authorities if they showed signs of disobedience to them or to the state (Besikci 1969).

Mechanization of agriculture added to the miseries of Kurdish peasants. In the 1950s the Turkish government began to provide cheap credit for tractor sales (Chapter
1), which provided aghas with further leverage vis-à-vis the peasants. Until then, the prevalence of labor-intensive agricultural techniques in the region had prevented aghas from demanding a larger share of the crop or expelling their tenants en masse. For the peasants the introduction of tractors, combined with the effects of the new land code explained previously, has been disastrous. As the peasants faced a total loss of means of production and expulsion, it became extremely important to prevent the landlord from working the land with tractors. The following case, provided by Nur Yalman (1971), sheds light on these struggles between the aghas and peasants and the shady ways in which aghas managed to avoid or suppress peasants’ claims with the help of state officials.

The father of Abdullah Bey [an agha] was a member of the Committee of Union and Progress [CUP] and had used his influence to buy a village near Silvan [a district of Diyarbakir]. This village provided him with some small income in the form of rent for many years. He had two sons, one of whom was mentally deranged; the other, Abdullah Bey who attended the Law Faculty at Istanbul University...While [Abdullah Bey] was away, and during the illness of his father, it became difficult to check up on the income from the village. Abdullah Bey suspected that it was beginning to dry up. The villagers put the blame on bad harvests, bad weather and locusts, and other natural calamities [for the diminishing income]...

Having little to do in Diyarbakir he decided that he would move to the village and go into cultivation himself on the lands of his father...When the villagers heard that Abdullah Bey intended to bring in his own tractor to the village, they became greatly alarmed. They visited Abdullah Bey to tell him of the great dangers involved in living in the village...None of this changed Abdullah Bey’s decision. He took some ten trustworthy men with him, all armed to the teeth, and one day simply drove into the village with this group...When he first took his tractor into the land, there was a shooting incident and one of the drivers wounded. Abdullah Bey shot back and wounded one of the villagers. There was a sullen period of a few months. More dogs were brought into Abdullah Bey’s compound, and its walls climbed higher and higher.

Abdullah Bey took over about 4,000 hectares of land out of a claimed total of 14,000. Whatever the total size, however, cultivable land evidently became scarce for the villagers. Tensions rose in the village, and the village itself split into two parts, one group went further down the Tigris and settled at a distance of 25 minutes’ walk from the main village...

Abdullah Bey’s settling in the village—his “castle” was in fact ten minutes away from the main village—led to significant changes. The main village was on fairly good terms with Abdullah Bey...The two hamlets away from the main village, however, were not on good terms with him. Abdullah Bey gave the main village
just enough land to subsist on. The others, however, were not given any land. They tried to plough some land near one of the borders. This time Abdullah Bey brought the land commission and found the right witnesses and established his own claim to this ploughed land. That year he would allow them to work it; but next year he would not permit it again. (Yalman 1971: 199–202)

All told, land distribution and mechanization of agriculture by the hand of the state, which provided small landowners in western Turkey with economic advantages (Chapter 1), resulted in further dispossession and pauperization of Kurdish peasants. Starting from the 1960s, migration from rural Kurdish region to surrounding cities and Turkish metropolises became a general phenomenon. Unlike many Turkish migrants, who left their villages voluntarily and continued to receive income from their land, these Kurdish migrants were totally deprived of any support mechanisms from the village and destined to work as unskilled day laborers, devoid of any social security whatsoever.

Intensification of security measures in the 1980s and 1990s in the Kurdish region sped up the dispossession and forceful urbanization of Kurds. Millions of Kurdish peasants were forcefully displaced as a part of Turkish military strategies in the “war on terror” against the PKK and sought refuge in the cities. After this immense population movement and huge increase in urban population, these new migrants faced worse living conditions and were subjected to multidimensional exclusion, which hampered their upward mobility (Saracoglu 2009, 2011, Yilmaz 2006). Whereas these peasants who refused to take the side of the state were pushed out of their homelands, those aghas and tribes that voluntarily collaborated with the state in the war on terror as village guards (koy korucusu; paramilitaries similar to Hamidiye Cavalry) made gains. Not only have these paramilitaries been paid salaries by the state, but some were allowed to seize the villages and lands that were left behind by the victims of forceful displacement (DISA 2013, Kurban et.al. 2012).
3.1.4. The State “Investing” in the Kurdish Region

The Turkish state’s intervention into socioeconomic dynamics in the Kurdish region was not merely through indirect means. As early as the 1930s, the state began to invest in the region, especially through state monopolies (known as State Economic Enterprises—KITs). The Republican elite gave rise to efforts of establishing the state as the central actor and engine in the country’s economy. In line with this economic outlook, various KITs were founded. Their stated aims were to vitalize the economy and contribute to the development of national industry by providing cheap raw materials to private enterprises, increasing productivity and profitability of the industry and creating new job opportunities. However, the actual effects of these state investments on the region and Kurdish population were increased pauperization, exploitation and sometimes oppression, rather than welfare and development.

Throughout the history of the Republic, numerous KITs reached and opened branches in the Kurdish region, including, but not limited to, TCDD (Turkish Railways), DSI (General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works), Sumerbank (Turkish textiles company), TPAO (Turkish Petroleum), TEKEL (General Directorate of Tobacco, Tobacco Products, Salt and Alcohol Enterprises), Et-Balik Kurumu (Meat and Fish Institution). Among these, TEKEL, Et-Balik Kurumu, DSI and TPAO are the most significant in terms of their effects on the Kurdish landscape and livelihood.

TEKEL was founded in 1932 and for seven decades functioned as the single institution holding the right to manufacture and sell tobacco products (Kayaalp 2009) 46.

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46 Tobacco production has a 400-year-long history in Anatolia and still constitutes a significant portion of Turkey’s agricultural exports (Islamoglu 2002). By the mid-nineteenth century, tobacco and cigarette production and trade were monopolized by two French companies: Regie and Narquileh. These companies were originally founded by the Ottoman government to pay its international debt. The extent of these companies’ activities was initially limited to tobacco production, but later on they became a part of a greater monopoly, REJI, which controlled all tobacco trade, finance and manufacturing under capitulations of the Ottoman Empire. Many tobacco producers were very adversely affected by REJI’s monopolization of
To the Kemalist elite, the main aims of nationalization and monopolization of tobacco production and trade by the state were to increase the national income and foster the tobacco industry and producers. In line with these promises, TEKEL provided subsidies to local producers, established tobacco factories across the country and provided employment opportunities for many. Despite all these apparent benefits, TEKEL brought new hardships and miseries to the Kurdish region.

The Kurdish region (along with the Aegean region) is the main source of oriental tobacco in Turkey. Adiyaman, Bitlis and Hakkari (especially the Semdinli District) are famous for their high-quality, smooth and mellow-tasting tobacco. It is an ideal crop for mountainous and barren lands. It gives good yield even in small plots carved on rocky hillsides, without demanding much irrigation. Its processing does not require complex technology, either. If you are up for some labor-intensive work, all you need is a big, sharp knife and dry storage to get golden tobacco ready to sell in local markets. For many years the region’s locals cultivated and processed tobacco using these simple techniques.

Despite its promise to empower local producers, in time TEKEL introduced new regulations and restrictions on the production and sale of tobacco. To monopolize tobacco production and trade, state-owned TEKEL introduced a quota system, which allowed each producer to cultivate only a limited amount of tobacco per year. The state promised to buy all tobacco produced within the set quota at a certain subsidized price. Nonetheless, because TEKEL was the single seller of tobacco products in the country tobacco production and trade. It imposed bans not only on unmediated tobacco trade but also on unregulated tobacco cultivation. Therefore, not only private tobacco sellers but producers who cultivated tobacco without the permission of REJI were treated as smugglers and fined by the special police forces of the company. The nationalization of the tobacco industry and foundation of TEKEL were a promise by the state to put an end to such practices (Aysu 2003).
and bans were imposed on private sales, those cultivators who exceeded the quota were suspected of illegal tobacco trade and treated as smugglers, fined or sometimes arrested by the gendarmerie. This might have been the case for all tobacco producers across the country. However, in the Kurdish region, with Turkish state authorities’ distrust and contempt of Kurds, these regulatory measures were deployed as punitive or disciplinary mechanisms against the population.47

The Meat and Fish Institution (Et-Balik Kurumu, or EBK, later called Meat and Milk Institution) also did little for Kurdish region’s economy. On the contrary, it further contributed to the pauperization of the region. EBK was founded in 1952 as a SEE with the aim of increasing employment opportunities and improving the national economy where the private sector, capital accumulation, industry and trade were underdeveloped and qualified personnel were scarce. EBK soon opened many branches in the Kurdish region. Traditionally, animal husbandry constituted a great portion of the region’s economy. Availability of vast pastures (commons) and long-established trade routes across parts of Kurdistan and the Middle East had made animal husbandry a lucrative business for many Kurds. Strengthening of nation-states’ borders, imposition of restrictions on cross-border trade and accompanying shifts in trade routes had harmed

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47 The case of Adiyaman is a good example in this regard. For instance, during my MA research in Adiyaman in 2005, I observed significant discrepancies between the conditions of Turkish (or Turkified Kurdish) tobacco producers in the city and Kurdish-Alevite cultivators on the surrounding hillsides. By that time TEKEL had been privatized and replaced by another regulatory agency, TAPDK (Regulating Agency and Board for the Tobacco, Tobacco Products and Alcoholic Beverages Markets). Although, unlike TEKEL, TAPDK does not purchase tobacco or subsidize production, it nonetheless imposes quotas on tobacco production, this time for the sake of public health. Hence, restrictive and punitive measures imposed on tobacco producers continue to exist (or are exacerbated) with TAPDK. In Adiyaman those big landowners who identify as Turkish and enjoy good relations with the state authorities (including state offices, the police and gendarmerie) were more adept at evading bans on tobacco production quotas and therefore punitive measures. On the other hand, the Kurdish-Alevite tobacco cultivator villages of Adiyaman were constantly checked and harassed by Turkish security forces. Having been marked as disobedient populations and expelled from the plains toward the hillsides centuries ago, these Kurdish Alevites have been subjected to extraordinary security checks and state oppression in the Republican era as well. Especially since the emergence of the PKK in the late 1970s, their every action, from what they bring from the city to how much they consume to whom they hosted to what and how much they produced, has been on the state radar. Under these circumstances, I observed, it was extremely hard for tobacco cultivators in these villages to evade punishment for overproduction.
animal husbandry in the region the most, so establishment of EBK branches in the region that purchased livestock and dairy, processed and sent them to the rest of the country might be considered as an indication of the state’s willingness to invest in and improve the region’s economy.

Despite the promised benefits of EBK for the region, it nevertheless did not go beyond monopolization of the meat and dairy trade, which had adverse effects on the local population. Many animal breeders who lacked the necessary means and knowledge to take their herds to the trade centers in Turkey and did not want to take the risks of smuggling had to sell their animals and products to EBK. After butchering the meat and processing the dairy in its plants, EBK transported these products to other parts of Turkey. The plants and transportation network might have provided some employment opportunities for the locals. However, the EBK personnel predominantly consisted of state employees, appointed by the central state institutions, and there was not much room for local Kurds, who lacked the necessary connections with the official circles, to find a job at the plants or function as intermediaries in the transportation or sale of meat and dairy to the rest of Turkey (Dogan 1982). Everything was monopolized by the Turkish state and its functionaries.

The Turkish state’s biggest endowment to the Kurdish region came in the 1970s, with huge investments under the auspices of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi, or GAP). Consisting of the construction of a series of dams, hydroelectric stations and irrigation canals in the Tigris–Euphrates River Basin,

\[48\] The situation of Kurdish animal breeders was exacerbated in the 1980s and 1990s when the Turkish military’s offensive against the PKK intensified; most pastures were declared military zones, and access was prohibited. Whereas most Kurdish herders were devoid of their livelihood, western regions of Turkey that relied on the Kurdish region for their meat supply were not affected much. Locals of Yuksekova, a district of Hakkari bordering Iran and Iraq, still vividly remember those days when convoys of EBK trucks passed through the town along with armored military vehicles, carrying meat from Iran to western Turkey.
GAP initially emerged as an infrastructural investment project. In the 1980s and 1990s, the scope of the project was expanded, and GAP transformed into an integrated development project that aims at improvements in multiple sectors ranging from industry and agriculture transportation to health, education and the empowerment of women and youth. GAP has been presented as the gem of Turkish state investments to the region. In government accounts it is presented as a grand step taken toward the development and well-being of “the East”—the most backward and underdeveloped region of Turkey throughout Republican history (Ozok 2004, Yegen 1996). However, despite all such advertisement of the project and its benefits to the region, GAP inflicted considerable damage to the landscape and people of the region.

First, GAP’s stated aims of improving the living conditions of local people and alleviation of poverty were handicapped by some flaws. Attempts to modernize agriculture produced effects similar to those of mechanization of agriculture in the 1950s to 1970s. Large landowners were said to benefit the most from the gains of the state’s infrastructural investments under GAP. Whereas they made immense gains by selling their land to the state, landless peasants and tenants were dispossessed and deprived of their livelihood without any compensation whatsoever. Second, GAP’s adverse effects in the region involved elements of environmental and cultural destruction. As a result of the construction of dams on river basins across the region, vast areas of arable land were submerged. Microscale climate changes were experienced around the dams, and because of bad irrigation practices, large areas had to cope with salination problems and soil degradation, resulting in a damaged habitat and loss of livelihood and income for many.

In addition to these common adverse effects of dams on the environment, several dams

49 This is mainly due to the compensation policy that provides payment only to the landowners whose lands were expropriated by the GAP administration. This policy totally ignores tenants, who are usually the main cultivators of land and the most impoverished.
submerged or endangered cultural heritage sites in the Kurdish region, including ancient cities, shrines and other religious places. Finally, the Turkish state considered GAP as a part of its counter-insurgency strategy against the Kurdish resistance. If one aspect of this strategy is to increase dependency on state institutions through development and “social” projects, the other comprises the deployment of water as a physical barrier against insurgent activity (Jongerden 2010). The first aspect of this strategy failed to a large extent, mainly because these socioeconomic projects were far from meeting the widespread politico-economic and cultural demands of the Kurds. Whereas the latter yielded some results and the Turkish state intensified its territorial control over the remote areas, it also led to further militarization and rendered the population more prone to violence.

All these state interventions, from the curbing of Kurdish autonomy through violent measures (deployed for the purposes of political and economic consolidation, assimilation and ethnic homogenization) to the expansion of state patronage into the region (through the empowerment of loyal aghas) to the state investments and regional development efforts, led to the political and economic dispossession of the region, hence marginalization and pauperization of the majority of the Kurdish population. Whereas these adverse effects of intensified state penetration gave rise to grievances in the region for decades, they mostly remained local and marginal. This trend changed in the 1960s with the emergence of Kurdish activism (mainly led by intellectuals and university students) in the relatively liberal political climate of the era. Organizing under various associations and, later, political parties, these activists managed to translate these grievances into broader political and economic claims. As I will demonstrate in the next section, debt claims from the Turkish state (from political, cultural and economic losses
that it caused in the region) constituted the kernel of the organization of Kurdish dissent in Turkey.

3.2. Kurdish Political Revival in the 1960s and 1970s

Although Kurdistan was the stage for various uprisings between the mid-nineteenth century and the late 1930s, it was not until the 1960s that the politico-economic aspects of the Kurdish question gained some precedence on the political scene. By the 1940s the Turkish state had achieved political consolidation of the country. The Kurdish uprisings of the 1920s and 1930s were successfully suppressed, mainly through harsh military measures and accompanying assimilation policies. Although these policies enabled the Turkish state to contain the Kurdish dissent and maintain a conflict-free environment, economic, social and cultural incorporation of the region into Turkey was yet to be complete (Yegen 2006). Transition from the single-party regime to a multi-party system in 1946 and the populist approach that the new ruling party (Democratic Party) embraced led to a shift in socioeconomic policies in Turkey. The protectionist economic policies of the preceding era gave way to economic liberalism, and incorporation of the whole country into the capitalist market economy was now considered the main way of achieving prosperity. Although this liberal economic outlook promoted free trade and entrepreneurship, it did not diminish the state’s role in the economy. On the contrary, it assigned the state a new role in the economic consolidation of the country, especially by means of undertaking infrastructural projects—mainly extensive road networks—and providing cheap credit to wider segments of the population, which was believed to foster the incorporation of more peripheral regions of the country into the capitalist market (Chapter 2). It was against this backdrop that the issue of economic development gained a renewed visibility in Turkey, which also affected the ways in which the Kurdish question was framed.
Starting in the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, Turkish nationalism began to associate the Kurdish issue with the problem of regional underdevelopment and disparity. However, this renewed attention to the eastern and southeastern (Kurdish) regions did not primarily emanate from a concern about economic underdevelopment and poverty. The Turkish political elite of the time sought to strengthen the territorial and national unity of the country through the incorporation of the marginalized and left-behind Kurdish region into the national economy. In other words, development was not considered a problem in itself but rather a part of the broader issues of national security and politico-economic consolidation (Yegen 2006).

The 1960s also witnessed the revival of Kurdish activism, which provided a ground for the widespread discussion of the “Eastern Question.” Kurdish political activists and intellectuals of the time were mainly from university circles in the big cities, where leftist and socialist ideas and organizations had started to take root. The limited freedoms that the 1960 Constitution provided and the leftist wave that spread across the world had provided a fertile ground for these activist students to raise their demands and voice some of the Kurdish grievances (Gunes 2012). In line with the Turkish state’s and Turkish leftist circles’ emphasis on the issue of national development, and maybe because of the obstacles in the path of direct expression of Kurdish political and cultural rights—they were considered by Turkish nationalists as separatism and hence a threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey—Kurdish activists mainly framed their demands around the questions of regional underdevelopment and inequality and the neglect of the east by the state. Despite this emphasis on the economic aspects of the Kurdish question, which demonstrate similarities with the Turkish state’s and Turkish leftists’ discourses on the issue, Kurdish activists’ articulation of their demands also demonstrated some peculiar characteristics. Unlike the Turkish state, which considered
the economic underdevelopment of the region a consequence of geographical
marginality and sociocultural backwardness (Kurds were “uncivilized and non-modern
people”) and emphasized the significance of regional development for the purposes of
national integrity, Kurdish activists’ main emphasis was on the role of state policies in
the deprivation of the region.

To these Kurdish activists, the economic problems of the region could not be
isolated from the political, social and cultural dimensions of the Eastern Question.
Criticizing the Turkish state for its oppressive measures against the Kurds and its
policies that pauperized the region, Kurdish activists of the 1960s articulated
underdevelopment not only as an economic problem begging for technical solutions but
also as a political one that required a shift in state policies toward democratization.

Mass protests in the latter half of the 1960s, known as “Eastern Meetings,” attest
to the problematization of underdevelopment and inequality as a political issue in the
Kurdish region. These meetings mark a turning point in the region’s history as they
mobilized Kurdish masses after a decades-long silence. Starting with the economic
backwardness of the Kurdish region and disparity between the western and eastern
parts of Turkey, these meetings quickly turned into venues where grievances of the
Kurds were mobilized on political grounds. Whereas these meetings were organized
specifically to address the economic underdevelopment of the Kurdish region—as
evoked in their title, “protest meetings against the backwardness of the east and
southeast Anatolia region”—they nonetheless took the issue beyond the depoliticizing
language of development by pointing out the links between the Turkish state’s
oppressive policies and deprivation of the region and its populations.

Ismail Besikçi’s (1992) extensive analysis of the Eastern Meetings provides
evidence for such rearticulation of the underdevelopment problem vis-à-vis political
aspects of the Kurdish issue. Besikci lists some of the main slogans and banners of the meetings: “Development for the west, exploitation for the east,” “Factories and roads for the west, commandos and gendarme stations for the east,” “We want teachers, not gendarmes” (Besikci 1992, cited in Gunes 2012: 62). These slogans and banners indeed problematize the economic disparities between the western and eastern (Kurdish) regions. But they go beyond these relatively safe harbors. Comparing and contrasting the state’s treatment of western and eastern regions and populations, they point out the interconnections between the state’s heavy military presence in “the east” and the region’s economic backwardness. In other words, these meetings reframe the Eastern Question less as a mere issue of underdevelopment brought about by the state’s incidental neglect of the region (or lack of presence) and rather as an intended consequence of the state’s particular (military, oppressive and exploitative) presence in Kurdistan.

This point is further emphasized in Tarik Ziya Ekinci’s (2010) memoirs. Ekinci, as one of the prominent Kurdish intellectuals and politicians of the time, took an active role in the organization of the Eastern Meetings. His account of the organization of an Eastern Meeting in Batman—a Kurdish town neighboring Diyarbakır—evinces how it was not the grievances regarding the “lack” of state presence but the very presence itself in the region—or the locals’ perceived sense of exploitation and dispossession by the state—that led to mass participation in this meeting.

The Batman inhabitants’ experience of the state was shaped by oil and dust. Batman is one of the few Turkish areas rich in oil. Almost a decade after the discovery of oil resources in Batman in 1945, *Turk Petrolleri Anonim Ortakligi* (Turkish Petroleum; TPAO), a state-run monopoly, was founded and started drilling and extraction activities in the region. As is the case with many state monopolies in the Kurdish region, TPAO’s
activities were far from benefiting the local economy. Oil extracted and refined in Batman was directly transferred to the more prosperous and industrialized western regions of the country by TPAO-owned tankers, without leaving any room for the locals to function even as intermediaries. Although TPAO provided some employment opportunities in the region, the majority of the locals were undereducated, and those lucky ones who found a job at TPAO were employed as manual laborers and paid much lower wages compared to the white-collar Turkish personnel. The state had invested and was very present in Batman. What Batman got out of this investment and presence was not development and prosperity, but only dust. TPAO tankers transporting Batman’s oil to Turkish cities along unpaved roads every day kicked up and left behind thick clouds of dust that filled and suffocated the city. The inhabitants, who knew very well what asphalt is made of—oil—found it hard to understand why the state did not asphalt their roads, a solution that would save them from breathing dust. The contrast between the rich oil resources of the city extracted by TPAO and the unpaved and dusty roads accentuated their grievances toward the Turkish state. Here, state investments (like TPAO) were not considered a sign of goodwill, generosity or development efforts but rather a means of extraction and exploitation. It was against this backdrop, Ziya Ekinci suggests, that the Batman meeting took place. Hundreds of thousands gathered downtown, shouting the same slogan: “Investment and oil to the west, exploitation to the east.”

Eastern Meetings and the particular discourse of Kurdish intellectuals and activists of the 1960s and 1970s, which problematized underdevelopment of the region by drawing attention to the oppressive and exploitative policies of the Turkish state, opened room to elicit the politico-economic aspects of the Kurdish question. Here, the question was reframed vis-à-vis the state’s particular mode of presence in the region.
Unlike the Turkish state authorities’ emphasis on “lack of the state” in the region, a lack defined in economic terms as lack of state investments, insufficient socioeconomic consolidation or failure to incorporate the region into the “national economy,” the focus of Kurdish activists was on the very presence of the state in the region—marked by violence, militarization, extraction, exploitation and deprivation. Put this way, the Turkish state—even its benevolent face that invests in the region and promotes state-led development and prosperity—appeared as an agent that subjugated Kurds by forcefully taking from them. However, because these Kurdish intellectuals had concerns about being marked as separatists, this critique did not develop into an elaborate discussion of the regime and the question of sovereignty (Gunes 2012). Instead, they contented themselves with claiming cultural rights and demanding compensation, specifically in the form of infrastructural investments, subsidies and other economic improvements, to make up for the losses and miseries of the Kurds and Kurdistan.

It was not until the emergence of the PKK in the late 1970s that a more radical critique of the Turkish state’s presence in Kurdistan was popularized, a critique that quickly evolved into a mass movement against state oppression and for self-determination. I now turn to this movement—which still dominates Kurdish politics in Turkey—in order to demonstrate how it reread and rewrote the history of the region, reconfigured social relations and produced new (resistant) subjectivities through a set of discourses and practices that generated a multi-layered debt-obligation relationship between the state and the Kurds and among the Kurdish community.

3.3. The PKK and Bedel: Obligations of Being a Kurd

Sakine Cansiz is one among many in whose bodies bedel is materialized. She was one of the two women founding cadres of the PKK, known for her resilience in the face of state violence. Her uncompromising resistance to military commanders of the
notorious Diyarbakır prison in the early 1980s, her strong character and her commitment to the liberation of the Kurds (especially Kurdish women) spread by word of mouth over years, making her a legend in Kurdish society.

Cansız was shot to death in Paris, along with two other Kurdish women activists, Leyla Saylemez and Fidan Dogan, in January 10, 2013, just a couple of weeks after the start of peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK. The assassin was a Turkish man in his thirties, said to have close connections to Turkish intelligence. Probably to clear the state of blame and suspicion and secure the peace process, Turkish authorities allowed representatives of the Kurdish movement to organize a funeral for these three women in Diyarbakır, the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan.

When the bodies of Sakine Cansız, Leyla Saylemez and Fidan Dogan were brought to Diyarbakır, I was in the city, doing the first phase of my fieldwork. Not quite knowing what to expect and filled with both the fear of a possible police attack and curiosity, I left my apartment to join the funeral. I waited for a minibus to take me to the Koşuyolu neighborhood, where the ceremony would take place. After standing at the stop for half an hour and a number of unsuccessful attempts to squeeze myself into packed minibuses, I heard someone calling my name. It was Ismail, a young street cleaner I had met a couple of weeks earlier while interviewing a family of value. He was a close relative of the family and had gotten quite interested in my research and offered me some help. After all, he was working at the Kurdish municipality’s cleaning services, where the majority of the staff was from families of Kurdish martyrs, political prisoners and the forcefully displaced. He was also a frequenter of neighborhood councils, the main grassroots organization of the Kurdish movement, so he could put me in touch with many who paid bedel. Unfortunately, I hadn’t had a chance to meet with him
again, mainly because of his busy schedule, and running into him that day was a lucky coincidence.

After shaking hands and exchanging greetings, Ismail asked me where I was heading. “To the funeral,” I said, without any hesitation.

“Alone?” he asked in surprise and added, “I am also going there. But it is impossible to take a minibus. All of them are full, you see? Would you like to walk there?” On our way to the ceremony site, I found that many took the day off for Sakine Cansız’s funeral. Ismail had also joined the demonstrations in front of the hospital where the bodies were brought the previous day and spent the whole night there, protesting. “This is the least I can do, you know,” he said, his voice hoarse from the previous night’s protests. “This is the least I can do in the face of the murdering of such valuable people.”

Near the ceremony site, the streets were crowded with hundreds of thousands of people. There was a mournful silence in the air, interrupted now and then by Kurdish and Turkish slogans like “Şehid namirin” (Martyrs don’t die), “Bij Serok Apo” (Long live Leader Apo) and “PKK halktır, halk burada” (PKK is the people, and the people are here). Thousands of riot police were also lined up on sidewalks with their armored vehicles, watching the masses walking to the ceremony site. The police and people were glancing at each other in astonishment, as neither of them were used to such a funeral ceremony for the Kurdish, one that was not interrupted by Turkish security forces.

We arrived at the meeting site just in time, only fifteen minutes before the coffins of the three women, covered in “kesk u sor u ser” (Kurdish national colors of green, red and yellow) and purple (representing the women’s movement) cloth, were received by the masses with elegies, cries, Kurdish marches and slogans. We gave an ear to the representatives of the Kurdish party and congresses, who were delivering touching speeches to commemorate Sakine Cansız, Leyla Saylemez and Fidan Dogan. Some of
them shared their memories of these women and praised their efforts and achievements, and some others had a hard time not bursting into tears. But all speeches had one theme in common: indebtedness and obligation to these women—a theme that found its clearest expression in the HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş’s words:

We are a people whose lands, villages, streets were turned into torture houses for centuries. Today, we witness that Kurdish women who recreated themselves from the ashes set a torch alight at the center of the Middle East to enlighten the whole world. This is to remind us that we should turn our faces to the future while never forgetting our past. Kurdish women once did not have a place even at the dinner table. These three women’s efforts and courage have taught us how to revolutionize the world. They are revolutionaries who resisted thousands of years of patriarchy and tore the darkness. We bow with respect in front of each of you. We are here today, we deliver these speeches today, we hold this microphone in our hands today, all because of you. We owe all to you, to the Kurdish women, to Kurdistan’s martyrs. This struggle did not start with us and will not end with us. We owe this struggle to revolutionaries like these three women. It is only by living like them, like revolutionaries, by struggling like them, that we can bring peace and an honorable future to this country. (My translation)

In Turkish Kurdistan, bedel refers to loss as well as obligation for what the Kurdish community sacrificed. This obligation lies at the heart of contemporary Kurdish political identity. All who identify themselves as Kurds are burdened with this obligation, through which they are expected to build their ethical stances and morality (Neyzi and Darici 2015; Ustundag 2013). Resistance constitutes the kernel of bedel: resistance to violence and threats of the Turkish state that often find expression in “Bedelini odeyeceksiniz” (You shall pay the price!). Appropriating this idiom—as in “We paid the price” and “We are ready to pay the price”—Kurds offer a rereading of their history as one of an excessive state violence and also courageous resistance.

Especially since the foundation of the PKK in the late 1970s as a national liberation movement with Marxist–Leninist tendencies, this resistance has mainly manifested itself as an armed struggle against the Turkish and other (Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian) states that rule the region. Considering Kurdistan as a colony of these four nation-states, the PKK cadres identified their primary aim as the decolonization of
Kurds and Kurdistan (Öcalan 1978, 2015; Besikci 2013). Whereas one major component of this decolonization struggle has been engaging in a guerrilla war against the “occupiers” (Öcalan 1982), the other has been the emancipation of Kurds from being colonized subjects.

The PKK organized its first offensives not against the Turkish state but against Kurdish aghas. Emphasizing the aghas’ complicity in the Turkish state’s establishment of colonial rule in Kurdistan and also in the exploitation and oppression of subaltern Kurds (mainly “productive classes,” such as the peasants and workers; Dogan 1982; Öcalan 1993), young PKK cadres identified Kurdishness as a political stance in addition to an ethnic category. The collective aspect of this struggle congealed in “the party” (the PKK) as the main representative of the Kurdish people. Bedel paid by the PKK cadres (in attacking the Turkish state and its collaborators, in resisting torture in prisons, in demonstrating a staunch stance in Turkish courts against the denial of the Kurdish people) were read as gifts to the community by many (Ozsoy 2010), obligating all who identify as Kurdish to receive these gifts (by acknowledging the sacrifices) and to reciprocate (by paying tribute to those who paid the price for the liberation of all).

However, these obligations of being a Kurd are not limited to commemorating and showing gratitude to those who paid bedel. They also involve taking action at an individual level to further the cause of these exemplary or heroic figures (Caglayan 2012; Cassier and Jongerden 2012; Gunes 2012; Ozsoy 2010) by “living like them,” “struggling like them,” even if this requires paying a price. In the Kurdish movement’s discourse, this latter obligation is considered essential to the Kurds’ decolonization, hence emancipation.

The influence of Franz Fanon’s (1968) and Albert Memmi’s ([1965] 1991) ideas on colonialism and anti-colonial struggles is quite apparent in the Kurdish movement’s
discourse (Guner 2011; Bozarslan 2012). Instead of considering colonialism as a mere macro-political phenomenon that is based on occupation of the land, imposition of a foreign rule, extraction of resources and intense exploitation, the Kurdish movement also puts a strong emphasis on its subjective aspects. The theme of the “colonized character” of the Kurds (somurge kisili) has been widely covered and analyzed in various publications of the movement, ranging from the writings of Abdullah Öcalan to the journals, magazines and newspapers of the movement: Serxwebun, Özgür Halk and Özgür Gundem. Connecting the long history of oppression, assimilation and exploitation to the shaping of Kurdish subjectivities, these publications identify an ordinary Kurdish individual as one who is alienated from society as well as from his/her very self:

The Kurdish individual has been drawn into such a situation that s/he is unrecognizable. So to speak, s/he is a freak of nature. S/he has been alienated from her/his labor, values, humanity and dispossessed of dignity, identity and character...Because the Kurdish individual has long been subjected to denialism and annihilation, s/he has become a mere appendage of the status quo...As such, her/his character only reflects slavery, abasement, hunger, oppression and all sorts of degeneration...With her/his submissive, degenerated, servant-like character, s/he has turned into a tool ready to be used [by the colonialists]. (Yuce 1990: 46–7; my translation)

Defining the situation as such, the Kurdish movement considered the decolonization struggle as one geared toward fighting against the colonizers as well as transforming Kurdish subjectivities. In this endeavor bedel would play the central role. Uncompromising resistance by Kurdish revolutionaries (like Mazlum Dogan, Kemal Pir, Hayri Durmus, Zilan, Sakine Cansiz and many others) has been promoted not only as sacrifices made for the oppressed Kurdish people but also as acts claiming dignity, respect and humanity, hence decolonization and emancipation at an individual level. Such intertwining of collective and individual emancipation (through resistance) led bedel to take on a meaning beyond loss, as a value (deger) that heralds the possibility of a new life. Those who paid the largest bedel (especially the martyrs) were called “values” of the Kurdish society, being depicted as exemplary individuals with a strong and
resilient character, humane nature and keen sense of justice. Their breaking off their ties with the “system” (leaving their families behind, quitting their schools and jobs, turning their backs on the comforts of life) and risking their lives and property have been interpreted as an achievement, a step on the way to freedom, rather than a loss. In various accounts on these revolutionaries, the beauties of liberation (earned through resistance) are emphasized as much as the hardships of struggle.

Timur Fidan’s (2002) piece “Debt of July” (Temmuz Borcu), in the first volume of Guerrilla Memoirs, is a good example in this regard. While narrating his own experience in Diyarbakır Prison in the early 1980s, Fidan focuses mainly on two figures: Hayri Durmus and Kemal Pir—two founding cadres of the PKK who lost their lives in a hunger strike in July 1982 protesting the imposition of submission on prisoners and widespread torture. In his account of these two prominent figures of the movement, Fidan not only tells of their uncompromising resistance in the face of excessive oppression exerted by prison authorities but also links this resistance to how they carry themselves and relate to other prisoners in a highly ethical way. The introductory scene of the piece starts with Hayri Durmus entering the ward where Fidan was kept. “He neither looked for a comfortable place, nor expected us to show him a seat,” Fidan writes.

He went to the spot in front of the cold radiator, just next to the toilet, where we preferred not to sit unless we had to, and sat on the naked floor. I first thought that he was an ordinary guy [halktan biri]. He did not say anything about who he was or try to establish superiority over us.

“Come and sit here,” I said, pointing at one of the beds. “That spot is not good.”

He looked at me with gentle eyes and replied, “Thank you, I am good here.”

I kept insisting. “That place is not comfortable at all. It is just next to the restroom, and the radiator’s iron tubes will hurt your back. Come and sit here.”

He kindly rejected my offer again. “No problem,” he said. “It doesn’t matter for me. The ward is packed. If I don’t sit here, one of us will have to, anyway.” (Fidan 2002: 15)
In another scene we see Hayri Durmus at the low, round dining table, eating rice and bread with other prisoners on the floor. While spooning his food, Fidan notices an oddity. Durmus takes a couple of bites of bread and then picks up and eats the crumbs that others dropped on the floor. “He was doing this so quickly and in such a natural manner that many of us didn’t even notice it,” Fidan comments. After observing him doing the same thing all the time, Fidan says, “Friend Hayri, you pick up the pieces we drop. There is plenty of food. Why do you do this?”

“No worries,” Durmus responds:

I always do the same thing. I don’t care whether the food is on the table or on the floor. In fact, I learned this from friend Abdullah [Abdullah Öcalan]. He never wastes food. One can shape his habits through discipline by doing the same thing over and over again, even at times that he doesn’t have to. He used to tell us that a revolutionary never leaves the table hungry unless he has to. S/he [a revolutionary] doesn’t allow others to leave the table hungry, either. Hard times are awaiting us. We need to ready ourselves... The weak and those who lack confidence cannot realize themselves. This is very common among Kurds. One should follow his ideals and shouldn’t be shy about expressing them. And practice should not contradict those ideals. (Fidan 2002: 16)

As the days pass, authorities intensified the pressure on prisoners. Beatings became an everyday practice. They were forcing the Kurdish inmates to sing Turkish nationalist marches, “admit” their Turkishness and break their ties with each other and the movement. In the face of this oppression, Hayri Durmus and Kemal Pir, along with some other prominent cadres of the PKK, decided to start an indefinite hunger strike. In a conversation that Fidan and Durmus held after a beating, Durmus defended their decision with the following words:

They have imposed submission and obedience on the people. Throughout history people have been shaped this way. We want to raise a free generation. This is our primary aim. This is what differentiates us from the nationalists and chauvinists. Imperialism and conservatism have shaped people’s thoughts and actions. They have turned them into slaves. This is more so in Kurdistan because of assimilation and oppression... The worst thing is to get used to this treatment. Submitting to this treatment leads one to lose his/her dignity, his/her will. From then on the individual loses his identity, turns into a machine that is totally alienated from his/her self... Heart stops. The individual dies at that point. All s/he is left with is his/her flesh. That is why we need to take a stance against this
oppression, no matter what its cost is, because it is a matter of life and death. (Fidan 2002: 24–5)

Taking the risk of paying the price for liberation (both collective and individual) is not something that only concerns the PKK cadres. As the Kurdish movement expanded over time to attract millions to the struggle, bedel leaked into the interstices of everyday life in Turkish Kurdistan, informing the subjectivities of many Kurds. Those who took the risk of resisting state violence have been considered to take a step toward breaking the chains that alienate and enslave them and transforming themselves into decolonized, liberated subjects. This has become an obligation of being a Kurd—an obligation to those who paid the price for all and also an obligation to oneself.

Throughout my research everyone I met who identified as Kurdish seemed to feel the need to emphasize bedel they had paid in one way or another. In some instances it took the form of lost sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers who were killed or joined the guerrillas or risked their freedom to resist the Turkish state. For these families bedel was more than losing a loved one, though. Paying tribute to these relatives came with other prices, ranging from random house raids to arrests to extrajudicial killings to intensified police surveillance to isolation from others who were scared of being exposed to state violence for contacting these people. As such, bedel is dangerously contagious. Once exposed, there is no easy way out of paying more bedel. Efforts to avoid bedel also have consequences in Kurdistan. They require full submission to the state by rejecting those “terrorist” family members and friends, breaking ties with the Kurdish political community, denying one’s political identity and sometimes abandoning the Kurdish cause and pledging allegiance to the Turkish state on TV. Therefore, no matter whether one resists or submits to the state, bedel shapes political subjectivities in the region in a pendulum swing between “We are ready to pay the price” and “You shall pay the price.”
In line with the ideological and organizational transformations that the Kurdish movement has undergone since the mid-1990s, bedel started to take on a different, more institutionalized character in the region. Giving up its secessionist claims, the PKK gradually embraced a radical democratic approach to the Kurdish struggle that is geared toward rendering the states ineffective in the region (Jongerden and Akkaya 2013, 2012; Ercan 2013; Ozsoy 2013). Just as the Turkish state has not been able to crush the Kurdish movement through assimilation and oppression, the PKK has not been able to put an end to the state systems of control through guerrilla war. Coupled with the dismantling of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, this stalemate led the PKK to reassess its strategy and develop a new understanding of self-determination, socialism, equality and democracy. After the capture of Abdullah Öcalan by the Turkish state in 1999, the organization made a turn toward radical democracy—radical in the sense that it seeks to build a democratic society beyond nation and state—and reorganized its structure around the projects of a democratic republic and democratic autonomy or confederalism: “the project of the democratic republic aimed at reforming the political constitution of Turkey, disassociating the idea of republic from the idea of nationalism” (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013: 189). It is in line with this project that the Kurdish movement pushes for a constitutional change in Turkey that would divorce citizenship from Turkishness and redefine it in civil terms. The project of democratic autonomy or confederalism, on the other hand, is inspired especially by the writings of Murray Bookchin, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. It is defined as a model of democratic self-government that is based on the bottom-up organization of society beginning at the local level, the notion of the people’s power and exclusion of the state. Since 2005 the Kurdish movement has been restructured on the basis of this project as a societal organization that presents an alternative to the nation-state. To this aim various assemblies,
congresses, political parties, NGOs and grassroots organizations have been founded, all seeking to organize different segments of society in order to achieve political, cultural and economic autonomy in the region.

Bedel constituted the main organizing theme of many of these flourishing societal organizations. Mothers who lost their sons and daughters to the state’s “war on terror” organized under Barış Anneleri (Peace Mothers) and have taken an active part in Kurdish politics with their participation in the congresses, political parties and grassroots neighborhood councils of the Kurdish movement. Families of Kurdish martyrs (“families of value”), families of Kurdish political prisoners and victims of forceful displacement were organized under solidarity associations called Mezopotamya Yakınlarını Kaybedenler Derniği (MEYA-DER), Tutuklu Hakları Derneğleri Federasyonu (TUHAD-FED) and Goc Edenlerle Sosyal Dayanisma ve Kultur Derneği (GOC-DER), respectively, and they became active in providing legal, economic and emotional support to each other and raising consciousness regarding the burning political issues of the region.

Having close connections to each other and other components of the Kurdish movement, such as the legal political party, women’s and labor movements, NGOs and neighborhood councils, these associations played a significant role in the building of a moral economy of bedel. Their active participation in public events such as demonstrations, funerals of Kurdish martyrs, hunger strikes, Newroz celebrations and other commemoratory events of the movement earned them further visibility among the Kurdish society. These peaceful demonstrations, into most of which the Turkish armed forces intervened, have publicly marked not only the Turkish state’s inhumane treatment of Kurdish civilians who simply demanded their rights but also these people’s perseverance and strong will for freedom in the face of oppression. As old peace
mothers with their white veils stood up against the heavily armed police and insisted on their demands for an honorable peace, many Kurds who watched them from their homes felt more and more obligated to these brave women for risking everything they had for the freedom of all.

Moreover, these organizations provided a ground for many Kurds to meet their obligations to those who paid bedel. Although many Kurdish activists, intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, journalists and students actively volunteered in these associations, many others who could not openly get involved for one reason or another provided other sorts of support. For instance, some demonstrated solidarity by providing transportation or housing for families of political prisoners to visit their loved ones in faraway prisons. Some made in-kind or cash donations to these associations. And some others sought to provide employment opportunities to those who paid bedel. With the Kurdish legal parties’ winning many municipal governments in the Kurdish region, the bedel moral economy has been further institutionalized. As I detail in Chapters 5, these municipalities and municipality-led initiatives played a significant role in bedel’s translation into economic debts and obligations. Such translation opens up room for the politicization of welfare, as it reframes social assistance as meeting a prior debt or obligation rather than the provision of an initial gift. Moreover, it contradicts the neoliberal logic that tends to present the provision of employment opportunities as an endowment, hence rendering it easier to strip workers of their rights. However, bedel is by no means restricted to these settings dominated by the Kurdish movement. It also leaks into the state space in Turkish Kurdistan, interrupting the usual and expected workings of the state in intricate ways. I will now turn to this state space, specifically the workings of state-sponsored social assistance programs in Kurdistan, to demonstrate the
uneasy interplay of the hegemonic debt morality of the Turkish state and bedel in the
domain of welfare governance.
4. The Debt-Producing Machine: State-Sponsored Welfare in the Kurdish Region

This chapter traces the decision-making processes of local petty officials in the Kurdish region in an effort to demonstrate how moral struggles over indebtedness, which configure the political space in the region, inform welfare governance. I will illustrate how the workings of Turkish welfare bureaucracy (in the offices) are informed by ideas deriving from the hegemonic system of Turkish debt morality, which sees social welfare as state benevolence, with beneficiaries expected to pay their debt to the state through loyalty and subservience.

The chapter begins with an overview of the emergence of state-sponsored social assistance programs in Turkey. Here, I will address the ways in which the region has become the main target of the Turkish state’s benevolence, as well as violence, since the mid-1990s. In the next two sections, I draw on my fieldwork in social welfare offices to illustrate the workings of social assistance programs as a coercive debt-producing mechanism that renders state aid contingent on the allegiance and subservience of applicants and beneficiaries. Here, I specifically focus on the discretion of local petty welfare officials (which is imperative in selecting social assistance beneficiaries) and how their decisions are informed by the hegemonic authoritarian debt morality in Turkey. In the last section, I consider the ways in which some state officials—particularly Kurdish officials with their own histories, experiences and relationships to those to whom they provide aid—challenge this debt relation between the state and citizens by emphasizing alternative obligations born out of bedel.
4.1. “[The Turkish] Republic is the Benefactor of the Poor/Abandoned” - Reloaded

In the 1990s, the famous motto of Ataturk, “[The Turkish] Republic is the Benefactor of the Poor/Abandoned,” got revitalized by Suleyman Demirel, the leader of the right-wing True Path Party (DYP - Dogru Yol Partisi), who is also known as Father (Baba) by the Turkish public. Demirel is a very peculiar leader in the Turkish Republic’s history. His life is an embodiment of the achievements of the benevolent state. Born into a poor Turkish peasant family in central Anatolia, he owes his career and his rise to national prominence to the welfare policies of the Republic. It was the state’s education system and its economic opportunities that endowed Shepherd Suleyman, as he is also called, with the necessary social capital that enabled him to acquire a significant position among the political elite, climb the ladder of Turkish politics up to the presidency and earn the reputation of benevolent Father.

In 1991, Baba (Demirel) was running for national elections again. Despite his right-leaning political stance, inauguration of a public health-care assistance scheme for the unemployed poor, referred to as the Green Card (Yesil Kart), became the gem of his campaign (Bugra 2008). Deploying Ataturk’s saying as his campaign slogan, Demirel

50 Health of the national population has always been on the agenda of the Turkish state, since its foundation in 1923. Especially with the establishment of the Constitution of 1961, this role of the state was explicitly declared in the article 49: “The state is entrusted with the duty of ensuring that all citizens have the opportunity to lead a physically and mentally healthy life and enjoy access to medical attention when necessary” (http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1961ay.htm). This article constitutes the ground against which the Turkish public health-care insurance system was established and institutionalized. Informed by corporatist principles, and developmentalist premises - which envision to attain full (male) employment through state-led economic growth, and job creation – this old system was in essence catering exclusively for the populations in the formal job market. There were separate public health-care insurance schemes administered for the state officials and their dependants (Emekli Sandigi), for private sector employees (SSK), and for the self-employed (Bag-Kur). All of these schemes were subsidized mainly by the premiums collected by the beneficiaries. However, there were remarkable differences between the service packages offered by these separate schemes, and more importantly this system, in general, left a significant portion of the population – who were either unemployed or working informally – to their own private means to cover their health-care expenses. Introduction of liberal economic policies in the 1980s brought about further concerns about the low level of public health-care coverage. To many, the predominant premise of the developmentalist era that it was possible for the majority of the male population to sustain long-term,
promoted the Green Card as a manifestation of the state’s goodwill and self-appointed obligation to its citizens-in-need (Atalay 2002). In the 1990s the Turkish welfare system was in transition. The economic and political crisis of the late 1970s which paralyzed Turkey. Structural adjustment programs and accompanying economic liberalization following the 1980 coup d’état had rendered the socio-economic promises of the Turkish state impractical. The state had abandoned its mission of being the main provider of employment opportunities. The new export-oriented, neoliberal economic model required the private sector to cut down on labor costs – and, as elsewhere, social security programs were among the foremost liabilities (Boratav 2008, Keyder 1987). Labor and student movements prominent in Turkish urban spaces in the 1970s had already been suppressed - thanks to new legislation and security measures enforced by the junta. At the same time, the Turkish state was faced with a burgeoning politico-economic problem: how to attend all those populations left without any hope for formal employment, those who were desperate and in need of social security and assistance? Stories about the poor who were taken hostage in hospitals because they could not pay

formal employment, seemed less realistic. Hence, exclusionary aspects of the existing public health-care insurance system, with its coverage limited only to the formally employed citizens and their dependants, became more visible (Bugra and Keyder 2003, 2006, Ustundag 2005). It is against this background that the so-called Green Card Scheme was introduced in 1992, in order to provide coverage to the low-income citizens, who fall outside of formal job market. One should note that the Green Card constitutes a significant break with the earlier employment-based public health-care insurance schemes (Gunal 2007), and it introduced a new population category, i.e. ’citizen-in-need.’ It is through this new category that many citizens in Turkey - around 3% by 1993, and 15% by 2007 (Savas et.al. 2003) – gained access to public health-care insurance, albeit in ambiguous terms. Yet, even after the establishment of the Green Card Scheme, there remained a significant portion of population, left out of the public health-care insurance system, and encompassing this population, and establishing a unified system that will cater all citizens on equal terms continued to be reiterated in the health reform proposals by succeeding governments.

See Bugra (2008) for an overview of the history of Turkish welfare system, and Bugra and Keyder (2006) for a broader discussion of the Turkish welfare system’s transition. See Yoruk (2012) for a more detailed discussion of the links between social movements and shifting welfare regimes in Turkey.
their health expenses or were forced to sign checks which put them under unpayable debts abounded.

Among the destitute of Turkey, Kurds constituted a significant portion. Systematically excluded from the economic networks and redistribution mechanisms, centering on the Turkish state since the foundation of the Republic, most of the Kurdish population has in fact never had access to formal employment or to social security nets (which offer public health insurance, pensions and other supports). But now in the 1990s this population was posing a major problem for the Turkish state. A group of Kurdish youth had become fed up with the decades-long oppression of Kurds by the Turkish state. Inspired by the upsurge of anti-colonial struggles and Marxist-Leninist movements around the world, they founded the PKK and started a guerrilla struggle for Kurdish national liberation in 1984. Quickly earning the support of Kurdish people in mostly rural regions, the PKK had become powerful enough by the 1990s to threaten the territorial unity of the state (Chapter 3). Demirel, as an experienced Turkish politician, was of course not unaware of this threat. Alongside promising the incorporation of formally unemployed poor into the Turkish public health-care system (through the Green Card), Demirel in his public speeches fervently pledged an uncompromising war against the separatist “terror” of the PKK.

Winning the election in 1991, Demirel indeed kept his promise. Unwilling to negotiate with those deemed “terrorists,” and yet unable to crush them, the Turkish state started an invasive counter-insurgency campaign targeting Kurds at large. Tens of thousands who were associated with the Kurdish movement were killed, arrested and

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Ustundag and Yoltar (2007) argue that employment opportunities and social security entitlements provided by the state hierarchize populations vis-a-vis the state; state officials were the first to be offered social security coverage (Emekli Sandigi), coverage that is still today more extensive than others; state officials are followed by workers (SSK); and workers are followed by the self-employed and agricultural laborers (Bag-Kur); finally, the unemployed poor are provided with social security entitlements through the Green Card.
tortured. The rural areas of Kurdish region was depopulated. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were forcibly displaced, villages were burnt down, pastures were declared no-go-zones and paramilitaries were deployed to seize these depopulated areas. In just a few years, millions flooded into surrounding Kurdish cities, doubling and tripling their populations. These small cities had not much to offer to these newly urbanized, “unskilled” peasants - in some cases not even a proper shelter, let alone jobs or other basic securities. Those who had the connections, means or the courage kept on their journey, migrating to the major Turkish cities in the western Turkey where they were mainly incorporated into the unskilled informal workforce (Goc-Der 2001, Yoruk 2006). And those who stayed in the Kurdish region continued their struggle with the worst forms of poverty, unemployment and sickness (Sarmasik 2012). In 1992, the Green Card scheme was established and became operationalized starting with the eastern (Kurdish) regions. So by this time, the state was offering free health-care services to millions of citizens who proved their lack of formal employment and insufficient economic means. The Green Card was followed by other state-led social assistance programs over the years, all targeting the unemployed poor of Turkey. Of course the policy has been formally neutral as to who (which population) is entitled to state aid. Nevertheless Kurds, who have been dispossessed by the state’s draconian measures and excluded from the formal social security nets de facto appeared to be the population who benefited the most from the welfare entitlements offered by the state. But does this

54 There is a controversy around the number of displaced and effects of forceful displacement in Kurdistan. One can follow this controversy by examining reports of HUNEE (2006) Aker et.al (2005, 2007), Kurban and Yegen (2012), Yuksek er and Kurb an (2009).
55 These include mainly sporadic in-cash and in-kind aid provided by SYDV, as well as CCTs (Conditional Cash Transfers), microcredit, and more recently cash transfer programs for the widowed women and caretakers of the disabled. Currently all are funded from the central state budget, albeit CCTs and microcredit programs were initiated and funded by the World Bank for the first 5 years – until 2009.
56 Statistical analysis demonstrates that there is a strong correlation between the granting of Green Card entitlements and Kurdish ethnicity (Yoruk 2012).
mean that Kurds are now the subject of the state’s benevolence instead of its violence? How does benevolence play itself out in a region in which state violence prevails? And what would it take for Kurds to benefit from state-sponsored social welfare? As a step toward answering these question, I will now delve into the workings of the Turkish welfare bureaucracy in the Kurdish region.

4.2. Making the Indebted Citizen

4.2.1. Going on Instinct

“Do not let appearances fool you.” This is how I was greeted by petty state officials at the Turkish state’s social assistance offices in the Kurdish majority cities. I walked into the Yesildere Social Assistance office in Diyarbakir on a hot summer afternoon in 2011. I sat on one of the blue benches in the waiting hall, with a dozen of applicants, mostly middle-aged women, a few elderly men and a mentally disabled young man. I was waiting for Ahmet Bey, my main contact there. It did not take long for him to show up. He walked through the small swinging door next to the counter with a smile on his face. This was the first time we would meet in person, but somehow he immediately recognized me within the applicant crowd of the social assistance office.

As soon as he stepped into the waiting hall, the applicants surrounded him. Some asked about the course of their application process, others tried to express how much in need they were. Ahmet Bey responded to each question in a very gentle manner, never losing his smile. He addressed the applicants either by their names, or by uncle, aunt, sister or brother, which I read as a sign of respectful intimacy. When he

57 The Turkish word “Bey” means Mr. In state offices, officials call each other with their names followed by “Bey” (for men) or “Hanım” (Ms., for women) to show respect. Throughout my fieldwork in social assistance offices I also followed this norm.
finally freed himself from the applicants, he shook my hand and invited me into the office, where we could talk without being interrupted.

After taking a seat, I introduced myself and started telling him about the purpose of my visit. I was there to conduct research on the poverty verification process. I had read the laws and decrees and had a general sense of the poverty criteria. On paper, the process was clear and straightforward: social assistance was provided to those unemployed whose monthly income was lower than one-third of the net minimum wage. But I was more interested in how this was put into practice. I hoped to spend some time in the office, talk to the officials and observe how they conducted the process. Ahmet Bey was very welcoming. Without even feeling the need to ask for the permission of Kaymakam (the governor), who is the highest-level bureaucrat in the district appointed by Ankara, he told me they would do all they could to help me.

He then gave me a tour of the office, while explaining how they conducted the poverty verification process in strict accordance with the law. He took me to the counter first. This was where officials received applications of “clients” (musteri). He explained that it was simple and quick to apply for state aid. The applicant filled out a simple form: name, citizenship ID number and official address and a couple of sentences stating the nature of application. The officials at the counter even helped applicants fill out the forms and later entered the information into a computerized system. And that is it. After filing the application, the only thing an applicant needs to do is to wait until they are contacted by these officials.

The next stop of our tour was the archive room. This was where they kept the application files, sequenced in numerical order. Ahmet Bey pulled a couple of random files from the shelf and showed me their contents. They were almost identical, with
minor differences. Everything appeared orderly, impartial and transparent – just as one would expect in a rational bureaucratic setting.

In the next couple of weeks, Ahmet Bey walked me through the whole poverty verification process. In order to identify applicants’ income, the officials first enter the citizenship ID numbers into an online database called SODES. This database retrieves all of the officially recorded information related to applicants’ sources of income (social security status, property ownership, tax reports) and it provides information about the households. To show me how it works, Ahmet Bey entered my citizenship ID number into SODES. He then started reading the screen: “You have some past social security records but you are currently unemployed. You live in Istanbul. You don’t own any vehicles or property. And you got a divorce.” Partly to avoid an uneasy conversation about this last piece of information and partly out of curiosity, I asked, jokingly: “Oh, then I am eligible for social assistance or a Green Card\(^58\), right?” Ahmet Bey gave me an enigmatic smile. On paper, yes, I met the poverty criteria. But in reality, of course I did not. During our conversations, he had already found out I was living in the US, not in Istanbul. He also knew that even though it was not recorded in the official registers of the Turkish state, I was working at Duke University (as a graduate Teaching Assistant), and had a good scholarship paid in dollars. But knowing or not knowing these details, he and his fellow officials would never be satisfied with appearances alone - even (or especially) the ones in the official records. They would have to investigate further.

During my time at social assistance offices in Diyarbakır and other cities, I realized that checking the official records constitutes only the initial step of the poverty verification process. If an applicant fails to pass this initial process - because of a

\(^{58}\) Although the Green Card system was annulled and replaced by General Health-care Insurance System (Genel Sağlık Sigortası – GSS) in 2006, local officials keeps using the word “Yesil Kart” (Green Card) to refer to health-care insurance support provided to the poor.
registered property or an active social security report or a tax report - the application is automatically denied without further investigation. Yet, passing this initial check by no means guarantees access to assistance. Semi-formal investigations or interrogations follow, in which the deciding factor is often little more than the “gut feeling” of local petty officials as to who constitutes a “true” citizen in-need.

This gut feeling, however, is not necessarily something one is born with. Rather welfare officials train themselves and are trained into it. After having been fooled over and over again by those faking poverty, officials learn how to be good gatekeepers. During my preliminary fieldwork in welfare offices in various cities and towns across Turkey, I had the opportunity to listen to stories about this training process. For instance, in my first day at the social assistance office in Senyurt, Istanbul in 2011, my interest in learning more about the actual workings of the poverty verification process led to a conversation among the officials Serkan Bey, Mithat Bey and Mehmet Bey, where they reminisced about their first couple of months at the office. They teased one another by telling stories about how naïve they were (“just like you” they said, looking at me) in their rookie days. They got fooled by all kinds of fake (not deserving) applicants. “There was this old lady once…” Mithat Bey started telling his story, and continued: “It was my first month then. An old lady came to the office. She said she wanted to apply for social assistance. She looked very poor. Her clothes were old, unkempt. She said she had no one left to take care of her. Her husband had passed away long ago. She had two sons, yet they were undutiful and did not look after her. She said she made her living with the help of her neighbors. While telling her story, she shed into tears. Those tears! They touched my heart and I made my decision without even giving it a second thought. I told her that I would help her get social assistance and Green Card. I even gave her some money out of my own pocket, and put her application into process
immediately. Once the auntie left, I checked the official records. She had no registered income, no social security whatsoever. So in the next official meeting, she got her Green Card and some in-cash transfer.”

A couple of weeks later, Mithat Bey went to the bank to pay a bill. While he was waiting, he saw the old lady at the counter. He watched her, and got suspicious. What would a poor old woman have to do in a bank? After she left, he approached the clerk, told him that he was from the Social Assistance office and they provided the old lady with state aid. Why was she at the bank exactly? The clerk was surprised by the news. He told Mithat Bey that the old lady just deposited 1000 TL (around $550 then) to her account. Mithat Bey dug deeper, and the more he dug, the more furious he got. The old lady was not poor. She had a significant amount of money deposited in the bank. He was fooled. Not only had he given his own money to someone faking poverty, but also his naïveté led him to waste the state’s valuable and limited resources on an undeserving one.

Feeding each other and the newcomers with such stories and always suspecting that the poor might somehow trick their way into the system, many welfare officials take the investigation process very seriously. The extent of these investigations ranges from interrogating the applicants to unannounced visits to their homes and neighborhoods. Although the official regulatory framework requires such on-site investigations only in cases of necessity, it at the same time leaves ample room for local officials to define necessity according to their own discretion.

During my research in Yesildere social assistance office, I had the opportunity to join a number of on-site investigations. These visits helped me get a better grasp of the ways in which local officials make their decisions. However, with each visit, I grew more confused about the criteria by which local officials determined who deserves welfare
benefits. Whenever I asked them how they make their decisions, they kept referring to their “gut feelings.” They claimed that they could just “tell” whether an applicant was deserving. But what was this mysterious gut feeling? What was that thing the officials saw or sensed in applicants that evaded my recognition?

One day, I was sitting at my usual place, near the counter at the Yesildere welfare office. Ahmet Bey approached me and said, they were about to leave for an on-site investigation. “Would you like to join us?” he asked. Of course I did. On the way to the applicant’s house, Ahmet Bey briefed me about the case. The applicant was a woman who had applied for a Green Card a couple of months ago. On paper, she was eligible. But after an on-site visit, officials reported that she was ineligible and her application was rejected. The woman was not satisfied with this decision though. She had called the office every day, telling the officials how much she was in need. Not being able to convince the petty officials, she somehow managed to reach the director.

As I was told by Ahmet Bey and his colleague Abdullah Bey, the director was a very compassionate person. He was a true believer of Islam and very soft-hearted. He simply couldn’t resist the woman’s tears and decided to have her application re-evaluated. Ahmet Bey was upset by the director’s decision. “But don’t misunderstand us,” he said to me, “I am also a very compassionate person, in fact an idealist.” He went on at length about how he left his well-paid job at the bank for his ideals, to help people in need. “But one needs to be fair,” he concluded, “especially when it comes to the distribution of state resources (kamu kaynaklari).” So his task now was to go to the woman’s house, re-check whether the previous report was sound, and write a long report describing what he saw there, explaining the reasons underlying his final judgment.
The woman’s house was in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Diyarbakir, one that has become a shelter for Kurdish peasants forcefully displaced by the Turkish armed forces in the 1990s. Shanty houses were built almost on top of one another. Street numbers were so disordered that it was impossible to locate the addresses. It was only after asking some passersby and shop owners for directions that we found the house. Once we reached the door, my own “gut feeling” was telling me that the woman’s application would surely be accepted this time. Everything I saw was in line with the images of poverty that I carried in my mind: a poor neighborhood with unpaved, dusty streets, kids playing outside in worn-out clothes and an unkempt brick shanty house.

While his colleague went to the next-door neighbor’s house to ask about the applicant, Ahmet Bey knocked on the applicant’s door. A young woman, surrounded by three small children, opened the door. Ahmet Bey told the woman that we were coming from the Social Assistance Office to conduct an investigation pursuant to her application. She welcomed us into her home in a very cheerful manner. There was also an older woman inside – her mother in-law. As soon as we sat down, Ahmet Bey took out his notebook and started asking questions. Although he was smiling and very polite in directing his questions, the whole process seemed deeply invasive. “How many people live in this house?” “Do you own it, or is it rented?” “How much rent do you pay a month?” “What does your husband do?” “You say he is unemployed, then where is he now?” “Those wardrobes look quite new and in good shape, how did you get them?” “And why do you need a Green Card exactly?” The woman calmly answered all the questions. She also insisted that we look at the other two rooms and the kitchen. She had nothing to hide. Ahmet Bey had a quick look at the kitchen, and he did not find it necessary to look further. All this took around ten minutes.
We found Abdullah Bey waiting outside, smoking his cigarette. The mission was accomplished. On the way back, Ahmet Bey asked for my opinion. What would my decision be? At first, I said that it was not my place to say anything. But he insisted. He was really curious. Then I told him that if it were up to me, I would grant the woman and her family their Green Cards, and also some social assistance. I found her account quite plausible, and to me they were not living in good conditions. Ahmet Bey flashed a quirky smile and said he knew I respond in this way. I was too inexperienced and too softhearted to not be fooled by appearances and catch the flaws in her account. He then explained the reasons why he suspected her credibility: Why did she, not her husband, make the application for the Green Card in the first place? Obviously he was too busy for that, most likely working somewhere. Second, the condition of the furniture, especially the wardrobes, was pretty good. How were they able to afford all of that? And finally, if they were really poor, she would not be that insistent in calling the office and asking for assistance. “The real poor,” he added, “have shame.” Because of all this “evidence”, the woman’s application for the Green Card was denied for the second time.

In line with the requirements of the General Health-Care Insurance System (Genel Saglik Sigortasi – GSS) which was enacted in 2006 and imposes mandatory health-care payments on all citizens except the Green Card holders, now she was also financially indebted to the state.

It is hard to delineate what makes an applicant credible to receive state aid, in the eyes of local officials, or what informs their gut feelings and personal interpretations of individual cases. Yet it is still important to contextualize these gut feelings and interpretations within the social, cultural, and political processes in which they are embedded (Ticktin 2006). For instance Ahmet Bey’s lack of sympathy toward the young woman, who insisted on her right to free health-care benefits is quite in line with
Turkish mainstream discourse about the moral fiber of the poor. Although welfare officials do not deny widespread poverty and unemployment in Turkey, most argue that welfare programs serve beggars more than true citizens in-need.

The true poor (gercek yoksul) do not claim a share of the state’s resources. They just accept their fate, feel gratitude for what the state generously offers and do not dispute the state’s decisions. These stereotypes inform the gut feelings of petty officials, and thus social welfare programs become yet another domain where symbolic and structural violence against the underprivileged are reproduced and exacerbated. Here, within the domain of social assistance offices, what is predominantly emphasized is the beneficiary-benefactor relationship between poor citizens and the state. This relationship not only compels the beneficiaries to show gratitude and subservience in their interactions with officials, but also presents the Turkish state as the original donor, hence erases histories of violence and dispossession that create poverty and inequality, especially in the Kurdish region. So I invite us to see state aid as an attempt to re-write the history in terms of the benevolence of the state and of those debts that accrue to underprivileged citizens (debts to be re-paid in the form of allegiance and subservience, and debts which may also be claimed financially in case one fails to prove his/her credibility).

But outside the social welfare offices, there lies a whole world in the Kurdish region – a life-world full of contestations, political struggles and enmities as well as alternative obligations and solidarities; a world that cannot be ordered by the sterile and technical depoliticizing language of poverty relief (Ferguson 1994). Welfare officials are not impervious to this world. On the contrary, constantly negotiating their positions vis-à-vis the Turkish state and Kurdish political community – in terms of who is indebted to whom – they usually find themselves between two impossible choices. Albeit not
immediately visible in the presumably neutral bureaucratic operations of social welfare offices, these politically charged and competing debt moralities simultaneously inform the “gut feelings” of officials in determining who deserves welfare entitlements and on what grounds. It is this context in which social assistance in the Kurdish region is situated, which I now turn to illustrate the ways in which officials’ gut feelings are further complicated by manifold politico-moral mechanisms and conceptions of credibility and indebtedness.

4.2.2. So-called Citizens

In 2008 the Turkish mainstream public was shaken by the news of some Kurdish children burning the Turkish flag in Adana. These protestors were objecting to the poor detention conditions of Abdullah Ocalan (the imprisoned leader of the PKK). Following the broadcasting of videos of the incident, Adana police immediately arrested 24 child-protestors. But the governor of Adana did not find this measure sufficient. In a public press release, he suggested that it was mainly the families of these children who were to blame. Hence, he declared, the families would be charged fines and their Green Cards cancelled (Radikal October 29, 2008). So Kurdish families were to pay the price of their youth’s insubordination to the Turkish state.

During my research in the Kurdish region, I was told many times about the ways in which the state uses social assistance as a policy of containment. Almost every time I mentioned my research about social welfare to my Kurdish interlocutors, I was told about a Kurdish applicant whose welfare application was rejected just because s/he had a sister/brother/daughter/son who was a guerrilla, or was in prison or was just “political,” meaning that he/she was associated with the Kurdish resistance movement. Listening to people bemoan the political biases of social welfare offices, I knew that
within the vagueness of the poverty verification process, it was impossible for them to prove such bias unless an official spelled it out as in the case of the Governor of Adana.

On another occasion, I was in the Kars social welfare office, interviewing a welfare official. After I gave a brief introduction of myself and my research, the official Mehmet Bey began to explain how they conduct everything exactly to the letter of the law. Listening to him for a while, I asked about the details of the poverty verification process: Who conducts this process? How was it conducted, exactly? Were there on-site investigations? Yes, Mehmet Bey answered. Evaluations and investigations were conducted with utmost diligence. Not by them though, by the police. He continued: “if they [the police] put a red mark on the application form, it means PKK. The application is rejected automatically.”

I was shocked. Not because this was unexpected from Turkish police or welfare officials, but because I couldn’t believe he would share this piece of information with me in such an ordinary fashion – as if it was the normal way of dealing with welfare applicants. Apparently, for Mehmet Bey at least, it was not important to perform lack of bias in front of a Turkish researcher. He simply implied that if applicants have any association with the PKK – whatever that means in the eyes of police and welfare officials – their suffering and claims on social welfare should not count - for him or for me.

In the hegemonic narrative/discourse of the Turkish state, they are mere “so-called citizens” (sozde vatandas⁵⁹) as the saying goes. So-called citizens are the abject other of the true citizen (makbul vatandas⁶⁰). Primordial debts to the Turkish state constitute the main thrust of both, but with a difference. True citizen is the one who

⁵⁹ See Yegen (2009) for a discussion on Kurds’ citizenship in Turkey and how they have been demoted from potential citizens (mustakbel vatandas) to so-called citizens.
⁶⁰ See Ustel (2009) for a detailed definition of true citizen (makbul vatandas) in Turkey.
performs loyalty to the state and prioritizes his debts and duties over his rights. His evil twin the “so-called citizen,” on the other hand, appears as this abject figure, who may at any time evade debts (in this case “betray”) to the state. So again, the relationship between the Turkish state and citizens is historically established through debt. If one aspect of this is the making of true citizen through state benevolence (or credits and loans in the form of endowments), the other is punishing through state violence those potential debt evaders – so-called citizens.

However, there are other, local histories in Turkey. In the particular context of the Kurdish region, the history of state violence and all that has been forcefully taken from Kurds by the state engenders a counter-debt morality of bedel (Chapter 3), thus contesting the notion of debts and duties to the state. The next section will discuss how bedel morality leaks into the domain of state-sponsored welfare through the “gut feelings” of Kurdish state officials.

4.3. Bedel within the State Space

During my research in the Kurdish cities in Turkey, I met many petty state officials—welfare officials, public school teachers, public healthcare personnel—who were moved by debts-obligations of bedel. They felt these responsibilities and obligations in their bones. Although it was never easy for them to openly meet these unofficial obligations, by following their gut feelings, they quietly inserted this counter-morality into the workings of the social welfare bureaucracy. Carrying these alternative conceptions into the state space, these individuals reconfigure the contours of social citizenship to include those who might otherwise be deemed “so-called” or “terrorist” citizens. In the following section, I will expand on this point using three stories. The first two stories, those of Aysel and Fehim, exemplify how “paying the price” may incite respect in those more privileged Kurds who hold positions as public servants and have
power to influence the provision of welfare benefits. Then comes the story of Serhat, a Kurdish public school teacher who also served as a social assistance official specifically to improve conditions for the forcefully displaced. What is common to these stories is the significance of alternative moral sentiments that stem from bedel, such as respect, indebtedness or obligation, in shaping the actions of these individuals who have some discretionary power over the provision of welfare benefits such as social assistance and free healthcare services.

4.3.1. Aysel

On a November afternoon in 2013, I met with Azad at Mim Café, one of the three cafés of Hakkari. During my stay in the town, Mim Café happened to be a meeting spot for me. Azad was already a frequenter of the café. He spent at least a couple of hours there every day, either to meet and chat with friends or to “settle some affairs.” Although Azad and I had long conversations during my three-month-long stay in the town and had many friends in common, what exactly these affairs were about remained a mystery to me.

Azad is in his late thirties. He has been unemployed for years. To my knowledge he is not looking for a job, either. In fact, other than smuggling and a few public service posts, there are not many jobs to look for in Hakkari (Ozcan 2014). His college degree might have secured him a position in public service, but only if he was not too political to pass the security check and could tolerate working for the state. Azad lives with his mother and younger brother in a one-story house in one of the Kurdish movement stronghold neighborhoods of Hakkari. Every day around noon he leaves his modest house for the town center (çarşı) to “settle affairs.” I saw him every day sitting at cafés and coffeehouses, drinking glass after glass of tea, with different acquaintances each
time and apparently having some serious conversations. If he is not sitting with people, you can find him in the main street, rushing to meet someone.

That November day, Azad was to settle business with me this time. The previous day, he had run into me on the main street and told me that he needed to meet with me to talk about something. I said, “Sure. What is it about?” Azad evaded my question. “We will talk tomorrow. Let’s meet at Mim Café around 2 p.m. I need to hurry now.” Then he added, “But I need your help with something.” Wondering what this help might be about, I waited for the meeting.

Azad entered the café in his usual warm manner. After greeting each person, he came to my table. We briefly talked about my research and other daily things. He inquired after some common acquaintances’ health and asked whether I needed anything. Then he got to the matter. “They” had a friend, Aysel, who had some serious health problems. She had broken her back a couple of years ago and had a series of other surgeries last year. Now she had to see a physician for a check-up but didn’t have health insurance or a Green Card (Yeşil Kart). They had contacted some doctors for help but couldn’t find anyone. Did I know someone who could help her? I was doing research on welfare, and I might have known some people at hospitals. While Azad was telling me this, I got curious about why it was so hard for them to arrange a doctor visit for her. In the end many people who do not have health insurance use someone else’s insurance card (especially Green Cards) to get healthcare or medication in Turkey. As many doctors and healthcare personnel tend to turn a blind eye to these “counterfeiters,” especially those who are poor, it shouldn’t have been so difficult to arrange a free doctor visit for Aysel. But I kept these questions to myself, and we set a date to meet her.

The next day, Azad picked me up from Mim Café. On the way he told me that Aysel was waiting for us at the HDP (pro-Kurdish party) office. She was in the women’s
initiative of the party, helping women resolve conflicts with their husbands or families, finding lawyers to provide legal assistance if they were dealing with domestic violence or wanted a divorce and also trying to empower them financially by creating job opportunities at the HDP-controlled municipality or women’s cooperatives. This would be my first visit to the HDP office in Hakkari. I was a frequenter of the women’s solidarity center of the municipality, had met many party members there and at cafés and acquaintances’ houses, but I had never been to the party office. The office was on the second floor of İran Pasaji (Persian Market), where many smuggled goods—tea, sugar, cigarettes, clothes, kitchenware and toys, mostly from Iran and Iraq—were sold at affordable prices. Azad and I walked through the market, climbed the stairs hidden in between the colorful windows of the stores and entered the main hall of the party office. The office’s matte walls and white plastic chairs and tables were a sharp contrast to the gaudy market. The only bright colors were green, yellow and red ribbons tied around photos of three women: Kurdish activists and martyrs Sakine Cansiz, Leyla Soylemez and Fidan Dogan, who were recently assassinated in Paris, allegedly by the Turkish secret service.

We found Aysel in a room adjacent to the hall, chatting with other women. She welcomed us in and rushed to the kitchen to bring us tea. After a long conversation on the activities and problems of the women’s initiative, Azad brought up the issue. He told her that I knew some people who could help her and she should feel comfortable with me. Aysel started to tell her story without any sign of hesitation. In 2011, when the Turkish authorities conducted a comprehensive operation against KCK across the country, Hakkari HDP office was frequently raided by the Turkish police. Many were arrested, including Azad, either for membership in the KCK or for terrorist propaganda, and others who were even slightly involved in Kurdish activism feared that they might
be the next target. In one of these raids, Aysel jumped out of the window on the second floor to escape a possible arrest. When she fell on the ground, she heard a crack on her back but didn’t feel any pain at first. She stood up and started running from the police. Then she felt a sharp pain, stumbled, fell on the ground and couldn’t move anymore. People on the street who saw the police raid carried her away to a safe place, where she stayed until she figured out where to go next. Her name might have been on the arrest list. If that was the case, she couldn’t go home. She couldn’t endanger her brothers by going to their place, either. They were already on the radar. So she asked her hosts to take her to a friend’s place that she knew would be safe. At her friend’s place, her pain got much worse. They couldn't take her to the hospital. Not knowing what else to do, her friend took the risk of going to her brothers and brought Aysel’s elder brother back with her. He had some bad news, though. Their houses were also raided, one of her brothers was taken into custody and Aysel was on the arrest list. She was now a fugitive.

A couple of days passed in pain. Meanwhile, her brother made the necessary connections to send her to the South (Iraqi Kurdistan), where she could find refuge and be treated. A long, dangerous journey on smuggler paths along the borders of Turkey, Iran and Iraq awaited her. Taking the risk of this journey, she finally headed to the South. Some relatives hosted her there. With their help she went to a hospital, where she found out about her broken back and was admitted for surgery. The doctors placed a platinum rod in her backbone. She remained confined to bed for some time but was eventually healed and got on her feet. After spending a couple of months in Iraqi Kurdistan, she returned to Hakkari, where she had been sought by the police, hiding in friends’ homes. Luckily, by the end of 2012, the judge revoked the arrest order. The criminal proceedings were still in action, but at least there was no risk of immediate detainment anymore.
The platinum rod in her spine hadn’t really interrupted her daily life much, except some pain she felt now and then. She could go to the hospital freely without fear of arrest, if she had the money or a Green Card. However, her finances were not good, and she was not able to obtain a Green Card. She couldn’t use someone else’s Green Card either because she needed more than a check-up. “What I need more than treatment,” she said to me, “is a doctor formally confirming that I have a metal rod in my body.” The note needed to bear her name.

Without questioning why she needed the note, I kept listening to Aysel. She said she wouldn’t be able to obtain the note from any hospital or doctor. In addition to financial constraints, she had some security concerns. The hospital would ask about her health history and require some documentation of her surgery. She didn’t have such documentation, nor was she willing to tell strangers that she had an undocumented surgery in Iraqi Kurdistan. She was scared that this piece of information might reveal her undocumented visit to Iraqi Kurdistan during her fugitive days and could be used against her during the ongoing prosecution. So Aysel needed a trustworthy doctor, preferably at a public hospital, who could examine her—free—and write an official note for her metal rod. Did I know anyone?

I did have some contacts, but given the circumstances, I was not sure whether they would be of help. My friend Fehim, who worked at a public hospital in Van at the time and would definitely find a way to resolve the issue, was out of town. My other friend Nermin worked at an association helping torture victims get healthcare and psychological services in Diyarbakır. However, I was not sure whether it was a good idea to ask her to find a doctor for Aysel. The association might pay Aysel’s healthcare expenses, as she had been injured during a police raid, but then she would have to go through an official procedure that would take her account on record, a process that
would exacerbate Aysel’s anxiety. I couldn’t call and ask Nermin whether she had some personal contacts at hospitals, either. I would have to explain why I was asking, and considering that the police tapped many Kurdish activists’ phones, telling Aysel’s story on the phone would not be a wise move. So I asked Aysel to go to Diyarbakır with me. I was quite sure that the chances of finding a solution to her problem were higher there than in Hakkari.

Aysel and I headed for Diyarbakır the next day. We had a long journey ahead and plenty of things that we were eager to know about each other. Aysel asked me about my research, my family and America. She felt sorry for my mom when she heard that she lived alone in Istanbul. She laughed at my stories about people in America who make appointments with friends just to have a cup of coffee and how I couldn’t find downtown Durham at first because it was so quiet and empty, unlike what I was used to in Turkey. Aysel’s stories were not nearly as lighthearted as mine. She told me about her family and herself in a very low-key style, without adding any extra dramatization. Nonetheless, their heaviness got under my skin. And it was during this conversation that I came to find out the reason why she so desperately needed a doctor’s note for the platinum rod in her spine.

Aysel’s beloved fiancé was in prison for twenty years, serving a life sentence. They were engaged when she was sixteen. At first Aysel had refused to get engaged. She was so young, not planning to get married and had other plans for her life. Her heart was filled with another sort of love—a dangerous love for “friends”61 that didn’t leave any room for a man. Probably noticing this affection and wanting her to overcome it, her family forced her into an engagement. Aysel knew her future fiancé and respected him very much for his political engagement, but she protested her family’s decision

61 In Turkish Kurdistan, people call guerrillas “friends”: arkadaslar or heval.
nonetheless. She locked herself into a room, refused to eat for days and cried all day.
None of these protests worked, though. She was soon publicly promised to this man at a
festive engagement party. Knowing about Aysel’s unwillingness to get married, her
fiancé tried to appease her. He would not force her into marriage until she was ready.
But these words didn’t cool her heart. She was frustrated and angry.

A couple of months after their engagement, Aysel’s fiancé, Ali, got arrested. He
was being tried for membership in the PKK. A couple of months after Ali’s arrest, Aysel
went to visit him in prison. “He had changed a lot,” she said to me. “He had matured,
and there was confidence in his face. He looked like a different person to me, and it was
at that moment that I fell in love with him.” Aysel’s family was not happy about these
developments, though. Now they wanted to break the engagement. She protested again.
She was in love with Ali now and was willing to wait for him, until the end of her life, if
need be.

In the following twenty years, Aysel followed Ali from one prison to another as
he was constantly transferred by authorities. She learned how to read and write just to
be able to read Ali’s letters and write back to him. Her love for Ali has grown and grown
over time. Everyone else in her family and in the town thought she was crazy. But she
didn’t care about what others thought. In the meantime, she became active in the
women’s initiative and grassroots organizing, which earned her much respect in the
town. However, this involvement had a price—one she paid with her health and visits to
Ali.

In order to visit Ali, she had to pass through a metal detector at the entrance of
the prison. Because Aysel had a platinum rod in her body, this seemingly minor
procedure had become a major obstacle for her. In her first visit to Ali after her surgery,
she could not pass the security check. When the metal detector beeped, she tried to
explain to the authorities that she had a rod in her spine. Not even listening to her, they forced her into a naked search conducted by male gendarmes. Even though they could not find anything on her, they refused to let her in. If she really had metal in her body, why didn’t she bring a doctor’s note? Aysel had neither the necessary connections, nor the money, nor a Green Card to obtain the note. The only option for her was to get help to bypass the official process.

We arrived in Diyarbakır with the morning light. After having breakfast and killing some time in a café in the Ofis District downtown, I called Nermin, expecting to find her in the association’s office. She sounded distressed and in a hurry. She was at the hospital. Her mother had become sick last night and was in intensive care now. It simply wouldn’t be appropriate to ask her for help. I hung up the phone with frustration. Who else might be of help? Then I remembered that Abdullah, a friend of mine in Diyarbakır, had a close friend who was a doctor at one of the public hospitals in the city. I dialed his number.

In the afternoon Abdullah showed up at the café. I had known him for a year, and we had been close friends in the meantime. He was a public school teacher. Although he was from Lice, one of the stronghold districts of the Kurdish movement, he had almost no political involvement except for being a member of a progressive union, Education and Science Workers’ Union (Egitim-Sen). He had grown up in a conservative Kurdish family, yearning for an independent life. As soon as he got a job, he rented his own place and started to live as he liked. He adopted a middle-class lifestyle, traveled all across Turkey, paid occasional visits to Europe and America, had friends from Istanbul, Ankara and Europe and enjoyed being an independent individual. At times we talked about politics; he told me how, as a Kurd, he had experienced and witnessed discrimination and oppression, especially at school and at work. He regretted that he
had almost lost his Kurdish because of the education policies that banned Kurdish language in schools and public institutions and forced students to learn and speak Turkish. As a high school teacher working in one of the slums of Diyarbakır, he also witnessed how his students from forcefully displaced Kurdish families struggled at school because of impoverishment, language barriers and the prejudices of some “Western” teachers who considered them potential terrorists. Such knowledge led him to sympathize with the Kurdish movement, the cause, activists and guerrilla fighters, whom he respected very much for their courage to risk their lives and freedom in fighting against “the denialist, assimilatory and oppressive policies of the Turkish state.” Nonetheless, he had always maintained some distance from the Kurdish movement—a distance that somewhat prevented him from being marked as a Kurd and enabled him to blend into Turkish society and secure his job as a civil servant.

After greeting each other warmly and catching up, I brought up Aysel’s issue. I contented myself with telling him only about Aysel’s health problems, emphasizing that she didn’t have a Green Card and could use the help of his doctor friend for getting a check-up. Abdullah seemed a bit unsympathetic and hesitant about the idea of asking his friend for help for Aysel. His friend was a cardiologist. The nervous system was not his specialization. He definitely knew some neurologists and orthopedists, but he might not want to ask his colleagues to take the risk of seeing an undocumented patient for free.

In the face of Abdullah’s unwillingness, I looked at Aysel to see whether she would be willing to tell him the reasons why she needed to visit a doctor, a trustworthy one. I had known Abdullah for quite a while. He would be more willing to take the risks of bypassing the official procedure if he knew more about Aysel. “Can I tell him the whole story?” I asked her. Getting her approval—a subtle nod of the head in
agreement—I told Abdullah how she had broken her back and got her surgery and why she needed a doctor’s note with her name, censoring the love story part and emphasizing that her fiancé was a political prisoner. Abdullah’s initial indifference gave way to genuine attention and sympathy. He immediately made a call to his cardiologist friend and arranged a meeting with him that evening. He also cancelled his plans and took us on a tour to the city walls, where we enjoyed the beautiful scenery of Hevsel Gardens and had a long conversation over dinner.

Later that day we met with Abdullah’s cardiologist friend, Caglar, at the same café. Caglar was a young Kurdish man from a lower-class family who had attained his career through much diligence and very hard work. After exchanging greetings Abdullah immediately got to the heart of the matter. He briefed Caglar about Aysel’s condition and told him her story, making it clear why exactly she needed to visit a trustworthy doctor and obtain an official note for the platinum rod in her spine. Caglar turned to Aysel and asked some specific questions about her health, with genuine interest. When did she have the surgery? Did she have any pain or other complaints? Then, not hesitating even for a second, he made a couple of phone calls to make an appointment for her. “Okay, all set.” Caglar said. “I talked to my friend Tarik. He is a brain surgeon at the public hospital (devlet hastanesi). He will be waiting for your visit tomorrow morning.” I didn’t expect it to be that smooth and fast. Waiting times at public hospitals are very long in Turkey, and my experience was that it usually took weeks, if not months, to see a doctor. To make sure that Aysel got what she needed, Caglar also walked her through the whole process. She didn’t have to worry. All she needed to do was be present at the hospital early in the morning and find Dr. Tarik’s office on the fourth floor. “I would have liked to accompany you,” Caglar added, “but I have an early operation tomorrow.” Tarik’s assistant would help Aysel with the
formalities. She wouldn’t need to explain anything to anyone. “Just give them my name and say you want a doctor’s note for your platinum rod. You will be all set.”

Abdullah must have felt the need to do more for Aysel, so he asked whether she knew the hospital’s location. She didn’t. I said I knew how to get there and would accompany her to the hospital. But knowing that we didn’t have a car, he insisted on giving us a ride to the hospital. He had a class early in the morning, but he would ask a colleague to replace him for an hour, drop us off, go to his class and then come and pick us up when we were done. He refused to hear Aysel saying he didn’t have to take the trouble. “It is no bother at all. I want to do it,” he responded. “It is my duty as a Diyarbakirite (Diyarbakırli).”

That night, while taking the notes of the day, I also wrote down my ideas about where this sense of obligation that apparently possessed Abdullah and Caglar might come from. It could have been interpreted as an obligation to help a friend, but only if we dismissed Abdullah’s initial unwillingness to help Aysel. Neither the hospitality that Diyarbakirites are famous for nor compassion for a citizen in need explained much, for the same reasons. It was only after listening to the details of Aysel’s story that Abdullah felt some responsibility toward her. Then what moved Abdullah and Caglar so much? Was it Aysel’s perseverance and resilience in the face of all the hardship she had gone through? Or was it because these Kurdish middle-class civil servants felt indebted to Aysel, who stood up for her love for the Kurdish resistance and paid its price with her health, youth, basic rights and securities. Whatever the reasons for their feeling obligated to Aysel, this feeling led them to forget their assumed debts and obligations to the Turkish state (especially as civil servants), ignore their official duty of protecting the state’s valuable resources from the “so-called” citizens and expand the contours of social citizenship in a way to include someone who openly disobeyed and resisted the state.
4.3.2. Fehim

Fehim works at a public hospital in Van as an administrative staff member. He was a friend of my roommate in Van. During the time I spent in the city, he paid frequent visits to our place, adding joy to our long evening conversations with his jokes and compelling stories. Fehim was a great storyteller. When he started telling a story, he immediately pulled his audience into it with his style of narration that was embellished with vivid descriptions of events and characters. I personally liked his hospital stories the best; he told us about all kinds of weird, funny or tragic events that had taken place in the hospital that day.

Fehim was the only son of a conservative Kurdish family. You could hear him telling sarcastic stories about his AKP-leaning, religious father who, according to Fehim, prayed all day long and yet never intended to give up his desire for money. Fehim started working at the age of seventeen, immediately after graduating from high school. His natural charm and social skills enabled him to quickly attain success as a sales clerk. Working for the best stores in Van, he managed to build quite a large social network and also save some money. Using his savings and obtaining affordable loans with the help of his acquaintances, he soon became a partner of a clothing store. Unfortunately, things didn’t go as expected, and he and his partner had to sell the store at a very low price. Losing his savings and still needing to provide for his family, Fehim found this administrative job at the state hospital through the help of an acquaintance. As he is very personable and a quick learner, he soon enlarged his social network in his new workplace, figured out the workings of the hospital and also acquired some medical knowledge about prognosis of illnesses, treatment alternatives and medications.

When I met Fehim, he was looking for another job. His beloved doctor girlfriend lived in Istanbul, and he wanted to move in with her. But this was not the only reason he
wanted to quit his job at the hospital. He was also fed up with working at a state institution. The bureaucracy that he had to deal with was one thing, and all the injustice that he witnessed on a daily basis was another. His hospital stories were all about these injustices, blended with dark humor. In these stories he introduced us to old Kurdish women who came for doctor visits with various health problems. In the ten-minute window allocated to each patient, these women struggled to tell the doctor about their complaints and get a sound diagnosis. Because many of them didn’t speak Turkish, they were accompanied by their husband or kids, who did their best to translate the complaints to non-Kurdish-speaking doctors. This translation work often hampered the diagnosis, as many women were embarrassed to tell the details of their symptoms in front of their relatives, and their inexperienced translators struggled with finding the right words in Kurdish or Turkish. So before these old women manage to take off their layers and layers of clothes for an examination, the session ends, the doctor comes up with an approximate diagnosis and prescribes some medication.

In other stories we learned about the difficulties faced by uninsured patients who lose their way within the wheels of bureaucracy or try to obtain a Green Card from a relative to be treated without finding themselves heavily in debt. We listened to Fehim tell about political prisoners or Kurdish guerrillas caught by the Turkish armed forces who are brought to the hospital for enforced health checks, how they are isolated even from the healthcare personnel, and their right to have a private session with the doctor is violated by the gendarmes.

Fehim was not political, or his political activities were limited to joining some demonstrations and protests and voting for the pro-Kurdish party. Nonetheless, feeling a great sympathy toward the Kurdish movement, he admired the political people’s resilience and detested the Turkish state. Holding a position at a state hospital, he felt
the responsibility of paying tribute to these people. He constantly expressed his regret for not contributing to the cause as much as he could. While he enjoyed his time with his family and friends, attended school and minded his own business, many lost everything they had and nevertheless resisted state oppression, joined the guerrillas to stand up against injustices and risked their lives for the well-being and liberation of the Kurdish people. So in addition to his usual hospital stories, he also liked telling stories of Kurdish guerrillas that he heard from others. In these stories guerrillas appeared as heroic and exemplary figures. In one instance they teach a lesson to a Kurdish landlord by arresting him for oppressing the peasants and let a woman guerrilla, daughter of one of his tenants, decide his punishment. In another, a captured guerilla refuses to obey orders and keeps fighting against the gendarmes, despite their being armed with heavy weapons. Or we listen to Fehim telling about a group of Kurdish guerrillas visiting a house in a village. They help the women of the house fix dinner and serve the food, and refuse to eat until these women join the meal along with the men and start to eat.

One evening Fehim came over to our place as usual. We had some other guests at the time. He joined the conversation and took the stage in his usual energetic manner. After dinner Fehim came to the kitchen with me to help with the dishes. As we did the dishes, he said in a gloomy tone, “Cagri, you have no idea what happened today.”

“What?” I responded, excited for the story about to come.

“Cudi’s mother came to me.” Noticing that I didn’t get it, he repeated, “Cudi, the guerrilla commander. He was martyred a couple of years ago. His mother came today.” And he continued, checking my eyes to see whether I got it this time. “You have no idea how bad she looked. Poor, sick, old and in sorrow. She has all sorts of illnesses. Diabetes, hypertension, kidneys—All, all her body is gone. Her other son looks after her. But they are so, so poor too. They want to get disability aid from social assistance. But you know
it is very hard. She needs a committee report from the hospital for 80-percent disability. They won’t give it unless the patient is confined to bed. She is not bedridden, but she really needs the aid money. They asked me whether I can do something. I said I would try. I will try. Let’s see.” He returned to washing the dishes.

I never heard Fehim talking about Cudi’s mother in public or bragging about what he did for her. But whenever I saw Fehim, I asked him about Cudi’s mother and how she was doing. Each time, he said “I am on it,” and briefed me about how he was talking to the doctors, arranging appointments for her. After a month of making the arrangements, he came and said, in his usual jolly and energetic tone: “Today, Cudi’s mother got the report [a positive one].”

4.3.3. Serhat

Not all stories of state employees paying tribute to fellow Kurds have a happy ending, though. Serhat is a Kurdish elementary school teacher who used to work as a welfare official in a district of Diyarbakır. I was introduced to him by a common acquaintance. Serhat and I met at a café in downtown Diyarbakır on a summer afternoon in 2011. While sipping tea and smoking cigarettes, Serhat briefed me on the official social assistance procedure, which was not much different from what I had already observed. But I was more interested in the personal side of his story: How and why did he become a welfare officer? How did he conduct the procedure? And on what grounds did he make decisions? These were the questions that I always asked officials in welfare offices, which were often evaded or answered by referring to a compassionate sympathy toward the poor that also came from their “gut feelings.” But Serhat followed an unconventional route in answering my questions. He started with his childhood in a peasant Kurdish family in a village near Diyarbakır. One day in the 1990s, when he was in elementary school, Turkish soldiers surrounded their village, he told me. Soldiers gathered the men
in the front yard of the school, directed their arms at them and declared that they should evacuate the village by the following morning if they would not join the paramilitary village guard units. Serhat’s village had refused to take arms against the PKK as paramilitaries (korucu, village guard). Left with no option other than fighting the Kurdish guerrillas or being killed by the soldiers, Serhat’s family, along with other peasants, left the village that night—leaving their houses, land, animals and most belongings behind. They came to Diyarbakır’s city center, where they stayed at relatives’ houses for months until his father gathered enough money to rent an apartment.

Serhat remembered those first years in Diyarbakır as full of economic stress, sickness, and precarity—not only for his own family but for all the new immigrants of the city, those forcefully displaced from their villages and districts. “When I graduated from college,” he concluded, “I made a promise. I would do my best to do something for those forcibly displaced people. And that is why I started working at the social assistance office.” Serhat told me that during his two-year post at the social welfare office, he always tried to attend to the forcefully displaced. But his superior official and the governor were so indifferent and sometimes even mean to these people that they continually challenged his decisions and actions. He finally decided to quit the welfare office and serve his people in other, less institutionalized ways.

... Official histories emerge from, and often erase, other stories in which the former’s domineering confidence is not without the latter’s subtle resilience. This chapter has presented one version of an official history in the making: the benevolent state and the making of the indebted citizen. Instead of focusing on policy-making and its bureaucratic apparatus, which, policy makers believe, give definitive shape to questions of state and citizenship, I have traced the making of Turkish citizenship at the
margins of the Turkish state (Das and Poole 2004) and through the “gut feelings” of petty welfare officials in the Kurdish region. Exploring the state’s welfare policy from the margin not only enables us to trace the fragmentary and ambivalent nature of implemented state policy but also provides a clearer view of the relationship between the state and its underprivileged citizens. Looking at this relationship through the lens of debt (as a technology of power) lays bare the specific ways in which the Turkish state maintains control over its population and territory, not necessarily through a centrally designed plan but rather by cultivating an authoritarian morality through its arbitrary ways of forceful taking and granting.

I have shown how welfare bureaucracy operates through such morality—manifesting itself in the value judgments of petty officials—more than official poverty criteria and thus produces and reproduces a benefactor–beneficiary relationship between the state and its citizens. It is through this highly charged morality that marginalized populations become indebted to the Turkish state. These citizens’ access to public resources is conditioned on their credibility, their capacity to be a true citizen, at least in the eyes of officials like Ahmet Bey and Mehmet Bey. And if they show any sign of bad faith, such as “lack of shame” or a disloyalty to the state by having any sort of affiliation with the Kurdish movement, they are not only excluded from the benefits of social citizenship, but their debts to the state materialize financially, as in GSS premium debts.

On the other hand, this state apparatus and its morality are contested in the Kurdish region through a counter-morality of bedel informed by a local history of state violence, dispossession and resistance. This counter-morality occasionally seeps into social assistance programs through officials like Abdullah, Caglar, Fehim and Serhat, who are moved by their obligations to those who “paid the price” rather than by
primordial debts or duties to the state. Nevertheless, the violence of debt remains largely intact in state-sponsored welfare offices, both in Turkey at large and in the Kurdish region, forcing underprivileged citizens into moral, economic and political subservience to the Turkish state.
5. “Whoever owes a debt should pay it”: Kurdish Movement-led Welfare Initiatives in the Kurdish Region

This noble city [Diyarbakır]! Her city walls, her Bağlar, her Tigris flowing tranquilly through the city, her Ofis bridging her youth, her roads closed by barricades, her voice quieted by sieges, her streets stained by panzer marks, her weariness from the curfews...This noble city, who has been impoverished by the pulled-down shutters [of stores due to the armed conflict] still shows no signs of diminution. She is so noble that she still stands upright, despite all she has gone through. The glorious lines on her face have been deepened with experience. You can see them either by looking at the poor houses or the city walls. Her standing upright despite all attempts to tear her down renders the perpetrators indebted to her. Those who watched all these atrocities in their corners filled with dread are rendered even more indebted. Then there is only one thing left to say: Whoever owes a debt should pay it!

—Sirri Süreyya Önder (my translation)\(^{62}\)

Sirri Süreyya Önder, an MP from the Kurdish-led HDP, wrote these lines in the foreword to Bajar, a booklet by a poverty relief association in Diyarbakır, Gelawej Derneği\(^{63}\). Founded with the support of the Kurdish Party-controlled Municipalities and dozens of NGOs and trade associations in the region, Gelawej has been fighting against poverty and for sustainable development since 2006. In this time Gelawej has acted as a conduit for funds to flow from institutions and wealthier citizens to those who lost their homes, livelihood and loved ones to the conflict in the region. It has reached thousands in the region, providing in-kind food assistance to woman-headed households and educational support for the kids of “families of value” (Chapter 3).

Bajar was published in 2011 as a part of Gelawej’s fifth anniversary activities to raise consciousness about the socioeconomic problems of the region and reach out to new donors. Similar to many other promotional publications, Bajar strikes one with its

\(^{62}\) For security and confidentiality reasons, I cannot disclose the full information of this booklet. Thereby, I use a pseudonym for this booklet, Bajar.

\(^{63}\) Dilavej Dernegi is the pseudonym that I use for this association.
poignant photos of people, houses and streets of Kurdish cities. Each photo captures
different yet interconnected faces of the city. A quick flip through the booklet introduces
one to poor children playing in a demolished neighborhood or collecting plastic in a
dump site and women sitting at dusty street corners and cleaning their old shanty
houses (Figures 8-10). These are poignant yet all too familiar images of poverty,
resembling others from “remote” places across the world, images that are constantly
brought to our privileged attention by news outlets, charities and national and
international poverty relief or humanitarian aid agencies.

Figure 8: From Bajar – Children collecting garbage
Figure 9: From Bajar – People sitting at street corners

Figure 10: From Bajar – A woman cleaning her yard
Despite this predictable resemblance, Gelawej’s *Bajar* bears some peculiarities. As we turn the pages, the poor of Diyarbakır all of a sudden take to the streets in exuberance, with torches and *kesk-u-sor-u-zer* (green, red and yellow) flags in their hands, celebrating the Kurdish national holiday, *Newroz* (Figure 11). This is a “tiger’s leap” into the mythical time, a momentary resurrection of the revolutionary figure of Kawa the Blacksmith, who, once upon a time, is said to have organized a resistance and saved Kurdish people from the cruel Assyrian King Dehak on the night of Newroz, March 21. This visual reference to collective resistance against injustice is also supported by texts inserted in between the images. These texts, like Önder’s words, foreground the history of state violence, dispossession and pauperization in the region. They call on the people to actively stand up against this oppression. And they demand payback not only from the state but also from the passive bystanders who “watched all these atrocities in their corners filled with dread” while the courageous paid the price—hence the call in the foreword to *Bajar*: “Whoever owes a debt should pay it.”

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64 Newroz is annual holiday celebrated on March 21 by Kurds, Persians and some Turkic groups. Whereas in Persian and Turkic contexts Newroz is celebrated as the beginning of new year or spring, Kurdish Newroz in Turkey differs from its counterparts. Since the early 1990s, Newroz has gained an extremely politicized character in Turkish Kurdistan and usually turned into street demonstrations especially when celebrations were banned by Turkish authorities. For further details on Kurdish Newroz see Aydin 2005, Caglayan 2012, Ozsoy 2010, Gunes 2012, Vali 2003.

65 I borrowed this phrase from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on History” (Benjamin 1969: Thesis XIV).
This chapter traces the ways in which bedel figures in poverty relief programs of the Kurdish movement. Despite the apparent similarities between Kurdish movement-led and state-sponsored social assistance programs, bedel morality plays a more overt role in the former at both discursive and practical levels. I will illustrate how this overt presence of bedel reconfigures the domain of social welfare as a political space where resistance (to the state and its authoritarian debt morality) is promoted and organized. This repoliticization, I argue, constitutes a challenge to the state-sponsored social assistance programs, which operate as an “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1994) and curb the claim-making potential of the marginalized through rendering citizens indebted to the state (Chapter 4).

The chapter focuses on the discourse and practices of Kurdish movement-led welfare initiatives in the Kurdish region. This is not because these initiatives are the
largest NGOs that provide poverty relief in the region. In fact, especially since the 2000s, various charity organizations and poverty relief associations have emerged across Turkey and the Kurdish region. Blending neoliberal poverty governance approaches with Islamic sensibilities, many of these associations defined their aim as extending a helping hand to the poor. Having their own TV shows on private Turkish channels, some of these charities, such as Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse), raised huge funds by showcasing individual poor families, displaying their destitution, unbearable suffering, cries for help and thankful prayers to the generous donors on TV. As such, these charities contribute to the reproduction of the Turkish state’s rhetoric, which presents welfare as benevolence, for which the beneficiaries are expected to demonstrate gratitude to their generous benefactors.

In this context Kurdish movement-led initiatives constitute an exception to the rule as they are the only poverty relief associations that challenge the hegemonic welfare discourse in Turkey and the Kurdish region. Transforming poverty relief into a sphere for promoting resistant subjectivities and organizing autonomous socialities—instead of loyal and obedient ones that are umbilically attached to the state—these NGOs work toward breaking the anti-politics machine of welfare governance through deploying the counter debt-obligation relationship entailed by bedel.

Despite their limited size, these initiatives play an important role in shaping the political space in the region, especially regarding socioeconomic matters. In order to appreciate their significance, we need to situate them in the broader network of political

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66 Turkey’s EU accession process played a significant role in this increase in NGO-led social assistance programs. Many poverty relief associations were founded with the EU funds provided for the expansion and empowerment of civil society in Turkey in an effort to accelerate the democratization process of the country. Nonetheless, Kurdish-led NGOs marginally benefited from these EU funds, mainly because they could not pass through the initial evaluation process that is undertaken by the Turkish state institutions.

67 See Aydogmus (2007) for a detailed analysis of Deniz Feneri and the new power relations, hierarchies and subjectivities it fosters.
parties, institutions, associations and grassroots organizations that constitute the Kurdish movement, in line with the “democratic autonomy” project that envisages the organization of a political society independent of the state (Chapter 3). Their intimate connections with other components of this network (especially with the Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, associations like MEYA-DER, TUHAD-FED, Goc-Der and neighborhood councils, all of which provide an organizing ground for those who paid bedel) inform their discourses and practices and at the same time augment their influence as well as their fundraising and administrative capacity. On the other hand, though, this alliance (albeit covert) puts these associations on the radar of the Turkish state and causes various legal and bureaucratic obstacles. These obstacles push these welfare initiatives toward embracing the hegemonic poverty alleviation discourse and practices to an extent.

The chapter starts with a brief overview of how poverty discourse became a part of the Kurdish movement’s political agenda, a recent development that leads to the foundation of Kurdish movement-led poverty relief associations like Gelawej. The next section will focus on the discourse of Gelawej and demonstrate how bedel informs the association’s approach to poverty alleviation and politicizes the domain of welfare through an emphasis on debts and obligations to those who paid the price. Finally, I will draw on my six-month-long volunteer work and research at Gelawej to illustrate how bedel discourse translates into the association’s practices, rendering it a venue for the organization of resistant subjectivities and solidarities.

5.1. The Kurdish Movement and Poverty

Poverty discourse, which began to dominate social policies in Turkey in the 1990s, also constituted the kernel of Kurdish municipalities’ and NGOs’ approach to the socioeconomic ills of the region. These problems have long been on the agenda of the
Kurdish movement. However, they were exacerbated in the 1990s by the intensification of war and counter-insurgency strategies of the Turkish armed forces. Forceful displacement of millions of Kurdish peasants, increased military presence and the state-imposed bans on access to pastures led to the destruction of livelihood for many. Faced with serious security risks and deprived of economic means, many of these peasants crowded urban centers, where they stayed in tents or shanty houses and barely survived. This intense dispossession and pauperization in rural areas and immigration also hampered social ties within Kurdish society, causing conflicts in the urban centers between the residents and the newcomers. Disparities between economic conditions of the urban dwellers and newcomers were so great that these led to deep grievances among the latter against the former. The immigrants often accused the urban Kurds of being indifferent to their miseries and failing to meet the obligations of hospitality, which have long been central to social relations among the Kurds (Bruinessen 1992, Minorsky 1968). Exploitation of immigrants was another source of conflict. Immigrants were offered only temporary jobs with no social security and minimal wages and worked under extremely poor conditions. Moreover, they had to bear the prejudices and contempt of urban dwellers who belittled them as uncivilized villagers (gundi).

Whereas some inhabitants of towns and cities and Kurdish activists made efforts to alleviate the economic problems of immigrant populations (such as opening their houses to the newcomers, providing food and other daily supplies and jobs, when possible), these individual efforts remained quite marginal. Under these circumstances, the Turkish state—which was the main actor behind such miseries—appeared to be the only benefactor of the displaced, with its more institutionalized and extensive social assistance mechanisms that provide free healthcare and in-kind and in-cash transfers, albeit selectively and in small amounts. These immigrants who paid the price of not
obeying or sometimes resisting the state’s orders, mainly by refusing to serve as village guards against the PKK, had become more and more dependent on the state with their survival in cities being conditional on their demonstrating allegiance and obedience.

The Kurdish movement was well aware of these problems. Issues of Özgür Gündem, the main Kurdish newspaper in Turkey, and Özgür Halk, a monthly magazine by the Kurdish movement, were full of news articles and op-eds about the poor living conditions of the forcefully displaced. However, the movement was unable to come up with a viable, comprehensive and sustainable solution to these problems in the turmoil of the 1990s. On the one hand, their approach was more geared toward liberating Kurdistan and Kurdish people from occupation, which, they believed, would also resolve the socioeconomic problems of the region. On the other hand, the movement was then too caught up with the urgencies of political struggle and had very limited resources. The Turkish state had set numerous obstacles in the way of political organization of the Kurds. Thousands of Kurdish activists, journalists and politicians were criminalized and arrested; Kurdish parties and organizations were banned; and thousands that were involved in Kurdish politics were assassinated by the state-backed death squads.

Within the relatively peaceful political climate of the 2000s and in line with the shifts in the Kurdish movement’s ideological outlook and organizational structure, Kurdish political parties enhanced their political influence. Winning many municipal governments in the region with the slogan of “We will manage our cities and ourselves on our own,” the pro-Kurdish political parties gained access to unprecedented human and material resources (Watts 2010). In addition to the enhanced presence of Kurdish parties in municipal politics, the Kurdish movement also expanded its influence among the general public in the Kurdish region in the 2000s through NGOs and grassroots
organizations. In line with Abdullah Öcalan’s project of “democratic autonomy/confederalism” (Chapter 2), various NGOs, neighborhood councils, cooperatives and village communes were founded. These municipalities and civil society organizations have undertaken numerous activities with the purpose of alleviating poverty in the region, ranging from providing job opportunities—especially to the families of value—to in-kind assistance and healthcare services to the poor to establishing laundry centers in poor neighborhoods to identifying local problems and finding solutions in a collective manner. Although these activities demonstrated a fragmented and scattered character for a while, they eventually took a more institutionalized form, as exemplified in Gelawej Derneği.

Gelawej’s approach to the socioeconomic ills of the region is shaped by the dominant discourses of the era. Poverty is the central theme around which Gelawej’s activities are organized. The association situates itself as an NGO that fights against poverty and for sustainable development in the region. Just like the state-sponsored welfare programs and Islamic charities, Gelawej’s main activities center around providing poverty relief, based on means-testing. However, having intimate links to the Kurdish municipalities and other Kurdish NGOs, Gelawej differentiates its approach from those of the state and charities. As I will illustrate in the next section, bedel (both in the sense of the Turkish state’s indebtedness to the Kurds for the violence and dispossession it imposed on the region and also in the sense of Kurdish people’s indebtedness to those who made sacrifices in resisting the state) plays a more overt role in Gelawej’s discourse and practices regarding poverty alleviation.
5.2. “Let’s join hands. Let’s save people from begging⁶⁸”: Bedel and the Politicization of Poverty and Welfare by Gelawej

I met Pınar at a Kurdish studies conference held in Diyarbakır in 2011. Pınar is a young Turkish leftist woman who studied anthropology at Ankara University and moved to Diyarbakır to write a book on Kurdish children. By the time I met her, she had already published her book and was working for the Educational Support Program at Gelawej. At the conference, I had a brief chance to talk to Pınar about Gelawej’s activities. She spoke with enthusiasm, not only about the association but also, and more so, about the children she worked with—kids she called “my children.” These were children of families of value, whose members lost their lives or were imprisoned in resisting the state and who risked paying bedel themselves by embracing their legacies and standing in solidarity with other families of value. Pınar admired the resilience of these families in the face of “all that they had gone through.” Noticing my interest in Gelawej, she invited me to the office to meet other Gelawej people and observe their activities.

A couple of days later, I paid my first visit to Gelawej. Pınar greeted me at the door of the association’s main office. Located on the fourth floor of an eleven-story building next to one of the new malls of Diyarbakır, it was an apartment with a spacious entrance hall opening onto an office, conference room and two classrooms for the children supported by the association. It was the summer break, and children were not around for the after-school, complimentary classes provided by Gelawej. Pınar was alone in the office, organizing some files and waiting for me to go with her to the Food

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This is the main slogan through which Gelawej Derneği promotes its activities. The original slogan, in Turkish, reads: El ele verelim. El açtırmayalım. The idiom el açtırmak, which the second part of the slogan draws on literally, translates as “to make one open his/her hand.” This idiom directly refers to begging, as beggars usually sit at street corners with one hand open and extended toward the passersby. Unfortunately, the phrase el açtırmayalım does not have a direct translation to English. It denotes an effort to prevent begging—not by forcing beggars to stop begging, but rather by making a collective effort to resolve the issues that make people beggars.
Bank (Gida Bankası), where other Gelawej personnel were at the time. She invited me into the office, offered water and tea and started telling me about Gelawej’s activities and its mission.

Gelawej ran two programs simultaneously: the Food Bank and the educational support for children. The Educational Support Program was specifically designed to empower the overachieving children of political families. Many of these families lacked the necessary means to create a suitable environment for their kids to succeed at school. The kids did not have their own rooms where they could focus on their studies. Some were traumatized because of their family’s losses and the state oppression that they constantly faced. Their families did not have the money to hire a tutor or send them to private after-school teaching institutions (dershane), which are crucial for students’ success in the high school and university entrance exams. Moreover, like many other children from Kurdish-speaking families, they were already at a disadvantage at school because of the inadequacy of their Turkish language skills and the prejudices of Turkish teachers, who, disregarding the structural inequalities in the region, simply marked them as lost causes, not worthy of further attention. All in all, these conditions hampered these students’ success at school, hence their prospects for upward mobility, condemning them to low-skill jobs (if available) and a life of poverty.

There were other NGOs and private teaching institutions that offered successful students scholarships or free after-school classes to prepare them for high school and university exams. However, these were mainly Islamist organizations or, to a lesser extent, Kemalists that indoctrinated Kurdish children in an Islamic and secular form of

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69 Not all Kurdish families’ primary language is Kurdish. After decades of state assimilation policies, many Kurds have forgotten their mother tongue or are bilingual. The middle-class Kurds in urban centers especially tend to speak Turkish at home and do not teach their children Kurdish, even if they know the language. Nonetheless, the primary language of those from rural areas and the displaced is still Kurdish, something that puts them at a disadvantage in their dealings with public institutions such as schools.
Turkish nationalism, respectively. The state also provided in-cash transfers to students from poor families (specifically through conditional cash transfer programs). However, these programs were administered by social assistance offices, which push beneficiaries to show allegiance and subservience to the state and are biased against politically active Kurdish families (Chapter 4). Prioritizing children of the families of value, Gelawej’s Educational Support Program was an exception in this regard. Not only was it empowering these kids by providing them with the necessary training to achieve success in formal education, but it also created an environment where these children could improve their skills and socialize without being subjected to denial of their identities, assimilation and discrimination. “These are children of families of value,” Pınar added. “They should learn how to stand upright, not submit.”

After this brief overview of the education program, Pınar moved to the Food Bank program. She began by emphasizing the comprehensive, nondiscriminatory character of the program: “The Food Bank is for the poor, for all the poor. When it comes to the matter of poverty and hunger, we do not approach people as victims of forced displacement, families of value…I mean, [we provide aid to] not only them. We have families [beneficiaries] whose husbands or sons are drug addicts. We even have a family [beneficiary] who was [associated with] Hizbullah. We try to develop a different

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70 For instance, the private teaching institutions of the Fethullah Gulen movement encouraged their grantees to stay in their dormitories free of charge with the promise of improved success. In these dormitories the students’ actions and behaviors are heavily supervised by chaperones—so-called “older brothers or sisters” (agabeyler or ablalar). These chaperones insist on strict observance of Islamic rules and seek to assimilate students into Turkishness by prohibiting them from speaking in Kurdish or organizing regular “conversation” (sohbet) sessions in which Turkish-Islamic culture and values are promoted. On the other hand, Kemalist NGOs such as Turkiye Egitim Gonulluleri Vakfi (Educational Volunteers of Turkey) prioritize poor children from “the East” in their provision of scholarships, but on the condition that they assume a secular Turkish identity; for example, not veiling their heads (for the girls) and denying their Kurdish background.

71 What is referred to here by Hizbullah is not the Lebanese Shi’a Islamist militant group Hezbullah, but rather the Sunni Islamist armed group, which emerged in Turkish Kurdistan in the 1980s and functioned as a paramilitary, counterinsurgency organization of the Turkish state in its fight against the PKK and Kurdish activists in the 1990s. For more information on Turkish Hizbullah, see Cakir (2011).
approach to the fight against poverty here, one that is different from that of the state.”

Finishing her words, she stood up and said, “Let’s go and visit the Food Bank.” Unable to ask my questions about the difference of Gelawe’s approach to poverty alleviation and filled with curiosity, I followed Pınar to the Food Bank.

The Food Bank was located about a mile away from Gelawe’s main office. As Pınar and I walked, the scenery changed. We left the newly built shiny mall behind. The street gradually narrowed, and tall, new buildings around the main office gave way to old, gray ones. The Food Bank was on the first floor of one of these old buildings. From afar, it reminded me more of a storage place than an office. The signboard was so indistinct that I couldn’t have located the place on my own. Pınar kindly showed me the way, and we entered the Food Bank’s waiting room. There were at least a dozen women sitting on plastic chairs, waiting either to get their monthly food packages or to apply for assistance. Some were old. Some were young with children. Some were in traditional Kurdish dresses of shiny satin or velvet. Others had a more modern look: T-shirts, jeans, slacks or knee-length skirts. On the wall across from the entrance, there was a huge banner: “Let’s join hands. Let’s save people from begging” (”El ele verelim. El actirmayalim”).

Passing through the waiting room, Pınar opened the plastic door to the office area. There were two elderly men sitting behind one of two desks in this small room, drinking tea while chatting with the beneficiaries. Xalo (Uncle) Mehmet and Xalo Taha, as they were called by others, were volunteers of Gelawe, just like many of its personnel. Despite their old age and the voluntary character of their work, they were the ones who showed up at the Food Bank before and left after everyone else, every day. They had been involved in activism and collective organizing for decades, and probably because of this experience, they had willingly undertaken a major part of the work in
Gelawej, from keeping financial records to listening to applicants’ and beneficiaries’
problems to helping other personnel prepare food packages on weekends. After a brief
and lively chat with Xalo Mehmet and Xalo Taha, Pınar took me to a meeting room at
the back. I was to meet the director of the association, Cetin Firat.

The meeting room’s door was wide open. Cetin Firat was busy with some
paperwork inside. He also had some other guests. Without bothering to ask for the
director’s permission, Pınar went into the room, inviting me as I hesitated with a gesture
of her hand. She introduced me to Cetin Firat and immediately began to tell him the
purpose of my visit: I was a researcher from the United States writing a book and was
there to learn more about Gelawej’s activities. My unexpected visit did not seem to
bother Cetin Firat. He was used to journalists and researchers showing up at Gelawej
asking for an interview. After greeting me with a firm handshake, he showed me a seat
and started with a statement that was quite different from the compassionate discourse I
was used to hearing in the state-sponsored social assistance offices: “Gelawej is not a
charity organization.” Maybe he noticed my curiosity, or maybe this was his standard
speech. He continued:

We do not distribute *sadaka* [alms] here. Gelawej is a model of solidarity. It was
founded with contributions from the municipality and many established NGOs.
The idea of Gelawej emerged in 2006, following a scientific survey conducted
across Diyarbakıır with thousands of people. Results of the survey were shocking.
We knew that poverty was a fact of life in Diyarbakıır. But it turned out that we
were clueless about its depth. We found out that thousands of families go to bed
hungry. Many people cannot afford food, let alone other basic necessities.
Something needed to be done in the face of all these, this hunger. So we came up
with the idea of establishing a food bank. The main aim of the project is fighting
against hunger without offending the impoverished people. In fact, we do not
like or use the words “poor” or “poverty” very much. What happened here [in
the Kurdish region] cannot be simply explained by these words. Instead, we
need to talk about pauperization (*yoksullastırma*), intentional pauperization of the
people by the state. The state robs people, takes everything they own and makes
them dependent on a piece of bread [that the state bestows]. The state seeks to
make Kurdish people beggars. This is what we fight against here.

In order to substantiate his claims, Cetin Firat referred to further evidence and
statistics. Did I know that in the beginning of the twentieth century Diyarbakır was one
of the wealthiest Ottoman provinces? Did I know where it stands in the socioeconomic development index now? At the very bottom. I could have found all this information in Gelawej’s reports. Had I seen shantytowns scattered across the city? None of them existed thirty years ago. After the forceful displacement of Kurdish villages by the Turkish state, the city’s population increased fourfold, hence the hunger, poverty and sickness reigning in the city. And did I know what the state does in the face of all this? It gives people sadaka and makes them beg for it. This was a strategy of the Turkish state to tame the people and break the resistance.

Gelawej’s approach to poverty was different from those of the state and Turkish charities. First, unlike the latter, which dehistoricize and depoliticize the issue and frame it as an almost natural phenomenon to be addressed at an individual level but not totally overcome, Gelawej considered poverty as a socioeconomic problem brought about by a long history of state violence and dispossession and demanding structural solutions and political will. Second, in Gelawej’s discourse, the Turkish state appears as the main culprit, not only of the economic dispossession and pauperization of millions of Kurds, but also of their political dispossession. Here, state-sponsored social assistance is presented as a subtle yet effective mechanism of procuring subservience (“taming the people”) through forcing them into an inferior and humiliating position (begging). In other words, the dangers of this alms-giving logic for the disenfranchised were not limited to economic dependence and therefore increased vulnerability to the whims of the state. It also involved a politico-moral dimension; that is, shattering the Kurdish people’s self-respect and depriving them of the honor and determination crucial to the unfolding of resistant subjectivities. Creating a civil network based on cooperation, solidarity and obligation—one that would bypass formal channels of social aid distribution and constitute an alternative to the state’s project of creating a loyal and
obedient citizenry—was only one aspect of Gelawej’s efforts. Another aspect was to 
decolonize the marginalized Kurdish people (in a Fanonian sense) and foster their 
resistance potential by reminding them of the debts owed to them and their honor and 
saving them from humiliation. This last point was particularly emphasized in Gelawej’s 
publication Bajar with the following words of Adil Zozani (2011; a Kurdish MP) written 
as a commentary to the Newroz photo (Figure 11):

My Honor Will Heal My Wounds

Ask Amed, and let’s see what she is going to tell us about herself: Hunger is not the main issue here. If a man is hungry, it doesn’t matter much. People do not die from hunger here. But if he loses his honor/self-respect, it means death to him. This is the statement that describes Diyarbakır. Most of this city’s residents who are alienated from their community and exiled from their homeland sit at the breakfast table with the intention of freedom; skip the lunch with an intent to resist; and the nights are lit up with the rays of rebellion. I don’t know how it is in your country, but here “the hungry want freedom.” It is because the past century taught us that “whoever rides someone else’s horse gets stranded.” This hungry and barefoot city knows that those lacking in honor/self-respect are insatiable, and the honorable never exchange their honor for a piece of bread. It is time to put it into words. The city should speak up: “I am neither hungry nor miserable. I am plundered. If all my plundered belongings are returned, the hunger and misery will disappear without leaving any trace. I am self-sufficient. I am Amed. My honor will heal my wounds. (Anonymous Report 2011, My translation)

What marks Cetin Firat’s and Adil Zozani’s words is an emphasis on bedel, in 
the sense of both debts of the state accrued by a history of violence and plunder and 
prices paid and sacrifices made (in this case, bearing hunger and poverty for the sake of protecting one’s honor) for the Kurdish resistance. This overt emphasis on bedel informs Gelawej’s discourse and activities, leading to the politicization of welfare, development and poverty alleviation, a move that transforms the anti-politics machine into a domain where debts (of the state) are claimed and resistant subjectivities and socialities are fostered.

Gelawej’s activities are not limited to the provision of educational support and in-kind food assistance. The association also seeks to reshape the broader discursive space of the Kurdish region by organizing conferences, panels and film screenings.
These events inform the public about the socioeconomic problems of the region, their roots and the association’s approach to poverty and sustainable development. The events are mainly attended by activists and municipal employees, but Gelawej’s public relations activities go beyond these relatively closed circles. The association also organizes regular meetings with members of unions to increase the number of its individual donors. The left-leaning public school teachers’ union (Egitim-Sen) and public healthcare personnel union (Saglik Emekcileri Sendikasi, or SES) receive frequent visits. In these meetings state employees are not only informed about the burning socioeconomic problems of the city, the political factors underlying them and the dangers of the charity logic that permeates many other (Islamic and Kemalist) NGOs’ and the state’s approaches to poverty alleviation. They are also reminded of their obligations to the disenfranchised Kurds, especially those who paid and are still paying the utmost price of the liberation struggle, and invited to be a part of Gelawej’s civil solidarity network, at the very least, by making donations.

The majority of Gelawej’s individual donors are these local state employees (excluding the military personnel). During my fieldwork I met many school teachers, healthcare personnel and welfare workers who were moved by Gelawej’s civil solidarity efforts. In addition to making donations, some came to the association to ask how else they could contribute to its activities. Some also worked toward expanding this network by informing their social circles about Gelawej, encouraging them to be a part of it and referring their students’ families, patients or the poor they know to the association.

Participation in Gelawej’s network involved various risks, especially for the state employees; being associated with a Kurdish organization might lead to criminalization and losing their job. Suspecting that Gelawej provided support specifically to the “terrorist citizens” (Chapter 3) and constituted a threat to “the state’s territorial integrity
and [Turkish] nation’s unity” (devletin ve milletin bölünmez bütünlüğü), state authorities sought to undermine the association’s activities by creating various legal and bureaucratic obstacles. State investigators paid random visits to Gelawej to check its accounts and lists of donors and donations as well as beneficiaries. These controls were carried out mainly for the purposes of detecting any source of income from Kurdish associations that were allegedly associated with the KCK and also any transfer to politically active Kurds. Investigators meticulously examined beneficiaries’ files, paid unexpected visits to their homes and often asked them and their neighbors questions about their involvement in the Kurdish movement, the whereabouts of the beneficiaries’ family members, whether any of them were missing (a sign of guerrilla participation), imprisoned for political reasons or had any ties to the (legal) Kurdish party. As a result of these investigations, Gelawej had been fined, its accounts blocked and activities banned for a couple of months.

In line with Abdullah Ocalan’s project of democratic confederalism/autonomy, an umbrella organization called the KCK (Koma Civaken Kurdistan—Group of Communities in Kurdistan) was founded in 2007. Soon after KCK’s foundation, the Turkish state declared it a terrorist organization and began to organize offensives against it. The first wave of KCK operations took place in April 2009. Many activists who were affiliated with the pro-Kurdish party or NGOs were arrested during this first wave. These arrests continued in successive years, resulting in the imprisonment of around ten thousand activists, despite the flimsy evidence about their involvement in the KCK.

For instance, in the aftermath of the Van earthquake, which hit and devastated the city in 2011, Gelawej organized a big campaign to collect donations from across Turkey and Europe. With these donations and the support of the cities of Diyarbakir and Van, it sent food and basic necessities such as tents, blankets and clothes to the victims of the earthquake. State authorities not only prohibited the distribution of these goods but fined the association. The rationale behind this punishment was that, according to the law, collection and distribution of aid during a state of emergency, such as a natural disaster, were to be organized and monitored by the central state. Interestingly enough, none of the other associations and charities were subjected to this legal restriction and fined. On another occasion, Gelawej’s activities were suspended for a month, and the association was charged a huge fine (one million Turkish lira, around $500,000 at the time), this time on the alleged grounds of corruption. Investigators found out that Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality transferred funds to the association, something that is considered a violation of official procedure. Whereas Gelawej proved that all these funds from the municipality were distributed to the beneficiaries, the court nonetheless declared the administrators guilty. Similar to the earthquake case, no other association’s accounts are examined so meticulously. This bias of state authorities is evident in the case of Deniz Feneri Association (one of the biggest Islamic charity associations in Turkey), where administrators regularly transferred the association’s funds to their personal accounts—something that escaped the authorities’ attention for years.
One reason for this excessive state control over Gelawej—control that hampers the association’s activities—may be the apparent stance that the association has taken against the state at a discursive level. Gelawej’s poverty discourse foregrounds the history of state violence and systematic dispossession in the region, undermining the dominant discourse of state benevolence that permeates the welfare domain and shapes the moral-economic relations between the state and its citizens. Moreover, Gelawej’s emphasis on debts of the state and obligations to those who paid bedel promotes the formation of alternative solidarity networks that are based on resistance, not allegiance, to the state. This discursive stance counteracts the longstanding, patronage-based redistribution policies of the Turkish state, which are geared toward the redistribution of resources on the condition of citizens’ repaying the state (in the form of allegiance and subservience) and economic (as well as political) dispossession of those (potential or actual) debt evaders: the unruly. However, the threat that Gelawej constitutes to the Turkish state’s sovereign power, which mainly derives from the aforementioned dialectic of state violence and benevolence, does not remain at a merely discursive level. The association also actively contributes to the construction of a counter-hegemonic space in praxis through its everyday activities, which seek to produce resistant subjectivities and foster nonstate socialities. It is these daily activities that I now turn to in an aim to better illustrate how bedel figures in the counter-hegemony building efforts in the Kurdish region, especially by overturning the hegemonic debt morality of the Turkish state. I will demonstrate how the emphasis on and recognition of bedel might empower marginalized Kurdish citizens, opening space for them to resist the political dispossession (the state stripping them of their political claims, identity and values) that is also inherent in the debt-producing mechanisms of welfare distribution in Turkey.
5.3. *Bedel in Praxis: Gelawej’s Poverty Alleviation Activities*

I returned to Gelawej in 2012, this time as a volunteer for the Food Bank project. Pınar was arrested in late 2011 for her involvement in the Kurdish movement’s Politics Academy (*Siyaset Akademisi*)\(^{74}\) on the alleged grounds of KCK membership. Fortunately, she was released, after seven months in prison, in the summer of 2012—just a couple of weeks after I moved to Diyarbakır. However, she hadn’t returned to Gelawej. Her father had forced her to leave the city and return to their home in the once majority Greek and Laz but now Turkified Black Sea region, where she would be away from the turmoil of the Kurdish region.

There was possibly another reason for Pınar to leave the city. Her stance during the court hearing had aroused a deep sense of frustration in the Kurdish political community. She was being tried along with hundreds of Kurdish activists. Although the majority of these activists refused to defend themselves in Turkish and their defense statements in Kurdish were dismissed by the court, on the grounds that they spoke in an “unknown language,” Pınar obeyed the law and defended herself in Turkish. Given that Turkish was Pınar’s mother tongue, this might have been excused by her Kurdish friends if not for the content of her defense statement. Standing in front of the judges and prosecutors, she seemed to abandon her previous political position as a supporter of the Kurdish cause and forget about the history of state violence, dispossession and resistance in the Kurdish region that informed her discourse while at Gelawej. Situating

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\(^{74}\) *Siyaset Akademileri* were founded in 2010 by the Kurdish-led legal party BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*—Peace and Democracy Party) to train activists in global, Turkish and Kurdish politics. The curriculum included courses on political economy, feminist theory, theories of hegemony, radical democracy and social ecology (Antonio Gramsci, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Murray Bookchin) and Kurdish history as well as the concepts and approaches that were introduced by Abdullah Ocalan, such as capitalist modernity, democratic modernity, the democratic republic, autonomy and confederalism, democratic ecology and *jineoloji* (science of woman). Many Kurdish and Turkish academics, intellectuals, politicians and activists taught in these academies. In the winter of 2011, the Turkish state targeted them, raiding their offices and arresting many who taught there on the alleged grounds of KCK membership.
herself as an anthropologist, Pınar explained the reasons of her involvement in Kurdish circles as a requirement of the ethnographic method. All she sought, she said, was to scientifically understand the causes and conditions of “helplessness” that many people in Turkey found themselves in. She had chosen Diyarbakır as her field site because of widespread poverty in the city. There was no other reason. In fact, she could have done this research in any other poor Turkish city, for instance in central Anatolia or in the Black Sea region. She was a social scientist, and all she wanted to do was continue her research. As a youth of this country, she wanted to live a carefree life. She wanted to go to her hometown and swim. Therefore, the court ordered her release. Pınar was free to leave for her hometown.

So I paid my second visit to Gelawej unaccompanied, hoping that the people I met there the previous year would be as welcoming. They didn’t even remember me. Nonetheless, they greeted me warmly and invited me to the kitchen, where they had breakfast together. When they finally asked me about the purpose of my visit, I bluntly told them that I was an anthropologist and wanted to spend a couple of months at the association to observe and get a better sense of how they carried out their activities. Maybe because I was too naïve and candid in communicating my purpose for being there—a purpose that might remind them of Pınar’s statement—or maybe because they felt uneasy about having a stranger in the association, watching them at all times, their first response to my request was an apparent hesitation. They kindly told me that they were not authorized to make such decisions and that I should talk to Ali Diren, the new director, and get his permission. He would be at the Food Bank tomorrow. Could I make it there then?

The meeting with Ali Diren went well. But unlike my interview with Cetin Firat, during which he introduced and promoted Gelawej’s outlook and activities at length,
this time I was to introduce and explain myself in detail. Where was I from? At which universities did I study? Who was my advisor at Bogazici? What was my research about? Why was I interested in the Kurdish issue and the region? Who did I know in Diyarbakır? Why was I interested in Gelawej? What did I know and think about the association and its approach? And what was my take on the state’s welfare policies? My answers must have satisfied Ali Diren, because he took a more welcoming stance and started asking questions about my possible contributions to Gelawej. Would I consider helping them design research projects, write grant proposals and reports and do translations? How much time would I have for them? I said I was more than willing to volunteer for Gelawej, at least three days a week during my stay in Diyarbakır. But in addition to assisting them in research, I would also like to help them carry out everyday tasks at the Food Bank or Educational Support Program. Would it be possible?

During my six months of research and volunteer work at Gelawej, I spent most of my time at the Food Bank, assisting Dicle at the front desk, where she received new applicants, evaluated their eligibility and kept their files. Dicle was a bold Kurdish woman in her late thirties. After divorcing her well-off husband and becoming a single mother to two teenage girls, she started working for Gelawej. She was the main person who interviewed applicants and selected beneficiaries. When I first met Dicle and told her about my intention of volunteering, she approached me with hesitation. “Cagri,” she said, “many volunteers came to Gelawej before, but they quit in a couple of days. They were all well-intentioned but had the wrong reasons to be here. Many came here to help the poor, to do something for them. But once faced with the realities of life, they quickly gave up. Some couldn’t stand the smell of the applicants. Poverty stinks, you know? Others were so compassionate and empathetic that they couldn’t take the stories of misery that they listened to. And some others thought they could save these people by
giving care and money or by becoming a part of their lives. But then they found themselves in trouble and disappeared when things turned nasty. Where do you stand? What do you see in these people?” I was not expecting these words. Nor did I have a good answer to the questions. Confused and searching for a good answer, I stared at Dicle for a while. Dicle did not wait too long for an answer. She continued: “Let me tell you what I see, then. I see my mom, my sister, my aunt, my friends in their faces. These faces and lives are so familiar to me. How can I look down on them? Or how can I be indifferent to them? This is my duty, and I just try to do what I am supposed to do.”

It took me quite a while to appreciate the value of this subtle warning. I had been warned before, by officials at welfare offices, about the hardships of poverty relief work. The common theme of all these warnings was the ills of compassion; but Dicle’s had some additional nuance. The main concern of the state officials was to avoid being fooled by those faking poverty. To them, compassion, or “soft-heartedness,” as they called it, was something that precluded good judgment, leading them to give a share of the state’s valuable resources to the undeserving. In order to prevent this, they sought to train themselves to see beneath the appearances and introduced some informal criteria to identify the “true poor”—criteria that involved markers of the good (makbul) citizen, such as lack of assertiveness, acceptance of fate, submissiveness, obedience and allegiance to the state (Chapter 4). In other words, their unease with too much compassion generally involved people’s taking advantage of the state’s benevolence. In Dicle’s case, on the other hand, her anxiety about compassion went beyond a concern about misuse of valuable resources. She seemed more worried about the unequal relationship that compassion and pity might produce between the providers and receivers of assistance—a relationship that might render the underprivileged vulnerable to the whims of compassionate subjects, undermining their dignity. By putting a strong
emphasis on the obligations of the providers rather than their benevolence, Dicle sought to contain the risks of this unequal relationship to the recipients.

This warning about compassion and the emphasis on obligation (to give) that marked Dicle’s words was also reflected in her practices at Gelawej. My volunteer work mainly involved accompanying and helping Dicle, especially in interviews with applicants. For months I sat alongside her, receiving applicants, listening to their stories and problems, helping them fill out application forms and discussing their cases with Dicle to assess whether they met Gelawej’s poverty criteria. The beneficiary selection process strongly resembled that of state-sponsored welfare programs. And, to my surprise, the poverty criteria were much stricter than the state’s, selecting those woman-headed households whose income fell below the poverty threshold of one-third of the official minimum income. Once the application form was filled out, an investigation process began to confirm the reliability of applicants’ accounts by checking their address, social security status and/or disability records in the state’s registers. The process also involved unexpected house visits. Gelawej personnel took this investigation process very seriously, not only because they wanted to allocate their limited resources to the poorest segment of the population, but also, and more so, because of the restrictions imposed on the association by the central state.

Despite these similarities between Gelawej’s and state-sponsored welfare agencies’ poverty assessment processes, Gelawej personnel found ways of differentiating their activities and putting their political and moral economic outlook on welfare provision into practice. Dicle, for instance, was particularly skillful in this regard. After listening to applicants, gathering the necessary information about their particular cases and informing them about the investigation process and the required documentation, she asked each of them whether they knew about Gelawej. No matter
what their response was, she informed them about the association with the following words: “We are not an institution of the state. This is an institution of the municipality. We don’t give you aid for god’s sake or out of benevolence. We do this because it is your right and our obligation. So please do not pray for us or say words like, ‘May god bless you.’ Just remember that we have limited resources, and there are all those other people who need food. If your kids find a secure job, or if your economic conditions improve, just let us know so that we can provide aid to others too.” Intrinsic in these words is an emphasis on the rights of the applicants instead of the benevolence or compassion of the providers of aid. The very act of giving this speech is an attempt to empower the recipients against the Turkish state’s debt morality, which demands subservience and allegiance in exchange for “endowments.” Here, the recipients are invited to be subjects who not only resist the debt morality of the state but also share the obligation to others by positioning themselves as active participants of Gelawej’s network, not as passive recipients.

When it comes to those politically active members (beneficiaries) of the Gelawej network, bedel—with the obligations and debts it entails—more clearly manifests itself in the associations’ practices. Unfortunately, I never had an opportunity to observe the workings of the Educational Support Program, which was specifically designed for children of the families of value. I was simply not allowed access to this program or its participants, except for tutoring one of these kids and helping some others with their homework. Nor was I permitted to attend the meetings where the Food Bank personnel evaluated applications from the families of value or families of political prisoners. These families were usually referred to Gelawej through neighborhood councils or other Kurdish NGOs such as MEYA-DER and TUHAD-FED—solidarity collectives founded by the families of value and families of political prisoners, respectively. Their
applications were evaluated in the main office behind closed doors, not at the front desk. Most of these applicants and beneficiaries did not even come to the association. The personnel helped them with their application materials and food packages, on the condition that they met the poverty criteria. Occasionally, individual families of Kurdish martyrs, guerrillas or political prisoners showed up at the association without the mediation of those other Kurdish NGOs. As a volunteer who helped the newcomers fill out the application forms, I was warned by Dicle, Xalo Mehmet and Xalo Taha that in case an applicant felt uneasy about providing information about other family members, especially their whereabouts, I should inform the personnel immediately. And if no one was available at the time and I had to fill out the form on my own, I should by no means mention anything in the comments section—neither about the family members nor any other information that might imply involvement in the Kurdish movement. Despite such secrecy around politically sensitive cases, I had some rare chances to observe the interactions between Gelawej personnel and beneficiaries who were considered to shoulder the main cost of Kurdish resistance.

In the first six months of my fieldwork, the political environment in the Kurdish region was very tense. On September 12, 2012, thousands of Kurdish political prisoners started an indefinite hunger strike. Abdullah Ocalan was kept in solitary confinement for years, and his legal right to meet with his lawyers and family was de facto suspended by Turkish state authorities. The prisoners demanded improvement of Abdullah Ocalan’s prison conditions and also access to the Kurdish leader. The hunger strike lasted for 68 days, bringing many prisoners to the verge of death. Heavy clashes

75 Abdullah Ocalan is kept in a prison on Imrali Island in the middle of the Marmara Sea. The only way to this island is by ferry from Bursa, a neighboring city to Istanbul. Turkish authorities often prevent access to the island on the pretext of mechanical problems with the ferry.
took over Kurdish cities. Thousands were in the streets protesting the Turkish
government for refusing to negotiate with the prisoners.

The Gelawej staff were deeply affected by these adverse developments. Having
relatives and friends among the hunger strikers, they were anxiously waiting for any
news from the prisons. They were also worried about the possible consequences of the
hunger strike for the Kurdish people in general. What would happen if the state
continued to hold its uncompromising position and hunger strikers died one by one?
Wouldn’t this inflame the conflict in the region? In despair, yet feeling the responsibility
to do something in the face of these deadly risks, they were joining demonstrations and
sit-ins that were held every day against the government. As their friend and a citizen
who shared similar concerns, I accompanied them on these protests. I also spent days
and nights with Dicle, having long conversations on the hunger strike, the Kurdish issue
and feminism as well as our personal lives—conversations that brought us closer and
strengthened our relationship.

The hunger strike ended on November 18 with the Turkish state permitting
Abdullah Ocalan’s brother, Mehmet Ocalan, to visit him at Imrali prison. During this
visit Ocalan sent a message to the prisoners asking them to cease the strike. Turkish
authorities, who so far had deemed Ocalan a terrorist and refused to negotiate with him,
immediately publicized his message on TV and through loud announcements from the
armored police cars that had seized the streets for days and shot bullets (plastic and real)
and pepper gas at the protestors. Pepper gas clouds and the horror of death and war
gave way to an atmosphere filled with hope. Peace negotiations had started.

Now it was time for the Kurdish activists to promote peace negotiations and
inform the Kurdish public about this new process. Many Kurds, especially those who
suffered the most from the state violence, were quite suspicious about the prospects of
the peace process. This might have been another ploy of the Turkish state to break the Kurdish resistance. Although state authorities seemed to take a step back from their uncompromisingly hostile attitude toward the Kurdish movement and demonstrate some willingness to recognize Kurdish cultural and political demands, they nonetheless kept intensifying their military presence in the region, especially by building high-security military stations known as kalekol, and postponing their promises, such as the immediate release of sick political prisoners. Moreover, the government put pressure on the PKK to bury its guns and leave “Turkish territory” as fast as possible. Under these circumstances, the growing anxiety of the Kurdish public about the Kurdish movement’s ability to successfully handle peace negotiations had to be appeased, and collective organizing efforts had to be intensified in order to put more pressure on the government. Therefore, the Kurdish-led political party, grassroots organizations and NGOs like Gelawej took an active role in organizing their constituency and enhancing their resistance potential in line with the demands of this new era.

One afternoon in April 2013, just a couple of weeks after the famous Newroz celebration in Diyarbakır where Abdullah Ocalan’s statement about the peace process was read to millions76, Dicle came to me with some good news. They were going to visit some beneficiaries at their homes and, if I liked, I could join them. I had been volunteering at the Food Bank for months, and so far I had not had a chance to go to a Gelawej beneficiary’s home. In fact, this was the general policy of the association. In order to protect the privacy of its applicants and beneficiaries, it did not allow its volunteers, researchers or journalists to get in touch with them outside of the office.

76 2013 Newroz is considered to be a groundbreaking event in Kurdish history. Newroz celebrations in Kurdistan are often banned by Turkish authorities, thereby becoming a scene for clashes between the Turkish armed forces and Kurds who insist on celebrating their national holiday. In 2013 Turkish authorities permitted not only the celebration of Newroz but also, for the first time in history, they allowed Abdullah Ocalan to address the Kurdish public, albeit with a letter.
Getting quite excited and also feeling honored by this invitation, I did not even consider asking Dicle about the purpose of these visits. Why would I ask, anyway? This should have been one of those random onsite investigations that were frequently conducted by Gelawej personnel to check the validity of beneficiaries' accounts—just like those I had attended at the state-sponsored social assistance offices.

Dicle, Xalo Mehmet, Xalo Taha and I got in the old white Fiat Doblo, the only vehicle of the association, which was used for all sorts of purposes ranging from carrying bulk food to running errands to onsite investigations. We slowly drove toward the impoverished neighborhoods of the city. Xalo Mehmet had the list of beneficiaries to be visited, including their names, phone numbers and addresses. Knowing by experience that addresses would not help us find the homes, I prepared myself for a long day of circling the narrow, twisted and dusty streets of Diyarbakır’s shantytowns. But I was too quick to reach this conclusion. Xalo Mehmet and Xalo Taha knew these neighborhoods like the back of their hands. And a couple of times when they had a hard time locating an address, Xalo Mehmet parked the car, told me and Dicle to wait and, along with Xalo Taha, continued their search on foot, sometimes for half an hour.

Probably noticing my surprise about these old men’s knowledge, resilience and vigor, Dicle filled me in. Both of these old men have worked in neighborhood organizing for decades. Over the years they have been to each and every street of the city. And as devoted activists, they knew the importance of reaching out to people very well, so they were taking these visits very seriously. These words of Dicle added to my confusion.

Weren’t we there for an onsite investigation?

Our visits that day were quite unlike the onsite investigations that I had joined before at the state’s welfare offices. After introducing ourselves and asking for the hosts’ permission, we would enter their home, take a seat either in the living room or the
kitchen, and Dicle, Xalo Mehmet and Xalo Taha would start the conversation by inquiring after our hosts. They asked no questions about how the household made a living or how they paid the rent or afforded the apartment or the furniture. It seemed as if they were not even interested in such economic matters, except for asking the household members whether the food assistance was enough to sustain them for a month and whether there was anything else Gelawej could do for them. These basic and friendly inquiries were followed by some words on the municipality’s and the association’s activities and the importance of collective organizing and building independent civil solidarity networks (independent of the state), especially given the demands of the current “political process.”

Although I had not participated in Gelawej’s onsite investigations before, I knew from my conversations with Dicle that there was some questioning involved in these regular visits—at least a cross-checking of the information in the application forms and materials. That day, it was obvious that we were not there to check up on the beneficiaries. Moreover, these beneficiaries’ attitudes and demeanors were quite different from those of others that I had met at the Gelawej office and also during the onsite visits conducted by state officials. What I usually observed in those latter cases was some manifest signs of gratitude on the side of the applicants and beneficiaries, which was expressed by thankful words, prayers and eyes, shy smiles and lowered heads, a gratitude that was warmly accepted by many welfare officials and yet insistently refused by Dicle. What distinguished the beneficiaries that I met that day, though, was an apparent boldness in their faces. Although they were very kind and welcoming, they did not show any gesture of exaggerated humility. These women received us in a very calm manner, gave Dicle and me warm hugs and kisses on two cheeks and shook Xalo Mehmet and Xalo Taha’s hands. They also inquired after us,
served us tea and insisted on offering us something to eat. They listened to Dicle and others with respect and genuine interest but without any sign of subordination—their heads held high, eyes looking directly into the others’ and without any hesitation in speaking their minds.

After the fourth home visit, Dicle looked at me and asked: “This was what you have been looking forward to, right?” We were visiting the political families of Gelawej—families to which I hadn’t had any access before. Dicle continued, “Our final visit will be to the home of a very active family from Kars. The lady’s husband was arrested in 2011 and tried, with life in prison. And her brother-in-law was martyred a couple of years ago. Last year, her only daughter enrolled at a college in Diyarbakir, and she moved here with her. She found a temporary job at a food factory, but the pay is too low, and they do not have any other income or any social security whatsoever. Friends at MEYA-DER referred her to us a couple of months ago. Since then, she has received food assistance from us. Now we will visit her and ask how she is doing.”

The lady’s home was a thirty-minute drive away from our location, and it was getting late. But no one showed any hesitation about visiting her. On the way Xalo Taha called the lady. She was at work and would be home in an hour—another half an hour of waiting for us. When she finally showed up, we were all exhausted by the heavi ness of the day. She also looked tired, but as soon as we got in, she went to the kitchen, put the teakettle on the stove and started fixing something to eat for us. Dicle and I helped her in the kitchen and with serving the tea and pastries that she offered us. After we all took our seats in the modestly furnished living room, Xalo Mehmet started the conversation by asking the lady about the health of her husband, the court case and her daughter’s school. Was she doing well at the school? Were they comfortable here, in Diyarbakir? Were “friends” helping her adapt to her new environment? Did she need
anything? We listened to her answering Xalo Mehmet’s questions in a respectful silence without interrupting her. This respect was also visible in Dicle’s and others’ manners and body language. Everybody sat at the edge of the chairs, backs straight, legs lined up, both feet on the floor (nobody crossing their legs) and hands placed on laps. It was a scene that I had never seen in welfare offices and onsite investigations before. Here, there was no trace of the intrusive and often degrading manner that marked most welfare officials’ attitudes toward beneficiaries in Turkey and the Kurdish region.

However, this is not to say that Gelawej personnel treated all their applicants and beneficiaries or even to all families of the Kurdish martyrs, guerrillas and political prisoners in the same way. On another occasion I was alone at the front desk, entering some new applicants’ information into the computer. It was almost five o’clock, and the staff were getting ready to close the Food Bank. An old couple showed up at the door with puzzled looks, trying to figure out what to do. Noticing me, they approached the front desk in a hurry. The old lady started to say something in Kurdish in an accent that I was not very familiar with. “Auntie, take a seat and wait. I will be back,” I said in shy Kurdish and stood up to call Xalo Mehmet and Xalo Taha from the other room. But the auntie continued, as if she didn’t hear me. She was speaking in a plaintive voice with sorrowful eyes. Noticing that I didn’t quite understand what she was saying, she slipped her hand into the pocket of her long, traditional dress, took out some photos and put them on the desk in front of me. They were headshots of three young men. The lady quickly picked up the pictures from the desk and said, this time speaking very slowly: “My sons. They all went” (Kuren min. Ew hemu çun). Anyone who stayed in Diyarbakır, even for a little while, would know what this last sentence meant. These words—Ew çu (S/he went), along with a name—are graffitied on many walls across the city. One can
hear these words in everyday conversations, said quietly, referring to those who joined the guerrillas.

Perplexed and not knowing what to do, I saw Xalo Taha approaching. He must have overheard the auntie. He asked her what she wanted without letting her say more. Even though I didn’t understand everything the auntie said, from the tone of her voice and some words and sentences I picked out, I got that she was pleading for aid. They had become feqîr (poor), mexdûr (victim/desperate), because their sons had gone. Her husband was sick (heste) and unemployed (bêkar). “[Ji]bo xetre xwede” (for god’s sake), they wanted yardım (help/aid). After listening to the old lady for a while, Xalo Taha turned to the husband and asked: “How old are you?” The auntie answered on behalf of her husband. He was fifty-eight. Xalo Taha responded in a very cold and dismissive manner, in half Kurdish, half Turkish. “Sorry, there is nothing we can do for you. You have a husband, and he is not sixty-five yet. We have some criteria, and you don’t meet them. If he is sick, you need to bring us some proof, an official doctor’s note.”

I could read the frustration on the auntie’s face. But she didn’t give up. She tried to show the photos in her hand to Xalo Taha. He should have given her aid, for their sake. Xalo Taha’s face turned red with anger. How dare she do that! “I told you that we cannot do anything. Stop insisting, and don’t use your sons for such things. Do you have any honor?” The auntie must have understood that there was no hope left; she lowered her head, gestured at her husband to get up, and they left together. But Xalo Taha’s anger was not appeased. He kept grumbling: “These people got used to begging. The state—the state made them beg, taught them to beg, turned them into beggars. Look at her! She has no shame. No dignity. She is deprived of values. This begging culture—it is this begging culture that we should fight against. This is how the state subordinates us.”

...
At first sight, this final scene might seem to resemble any ordinary encounter between state officials and beneficiaries at the state-sponsored welfare offices. The auntie and her husband came to the office to ask for help, similar to the ways in which any applicant would apply for aid in a state-sponsored social assistance office. They approached the first person they saw sitting behind a desk, considering her an authority whose compassionate attention they should attract in order to be eligible for aid. With their manners and body language, they sought to emphasize their destitute and neediness. Similarly, Xalo Taha’s attitude might seem to resemble those dismissive and patronizing attitudes of the state officials that I detailed in Chapter 4. However, there are some critical differences to be considered before reaching a quick conclusion.

First of all, this couple, who does not meet Gelawej’s poverty criteria, tried to make their way to the association’s network by making a claim on aid through bedel. Emphasizing that their sons joined the PKK, the auntie deployed bedel as a means of cultivating compassion to receive aid – an act Xalo Taha interpreted as a reflection of, what he calls, “culture of begging.” Gelawej staff believed that this culture was promoted by the Turkish state to subordinate the Kurdish populations and break the resistance by depriving them of their dignity. Put as such, bedel and begging appear as incommensurable things. Whereas resistance constitutes the core of bedel, begging produces submissiveness. Thereby, the act of the auntie, according to Xalo Taha, bore the risk of undermining the particular political significance of bedel by turning it into a social currency through which compassion and pity, hence social aid could be received. It was read as a derivative of the state-sponsored welfare practices that required applicants and beneficiaries to demonstrate obedience in order to be considered “deserving.” This constituted a stark contrast with Gelawej’s efforts to politicize the
issue of poverty and turn welfare into a domain where resistant socialities and subjectivities are nurtured.

Secondly, coordination and cooperation with other Kurdish institutions, grassroots organizations and NGOs that are organized around bedel are imperative in Gelawej’s efforts to promote a culture of resistance. Bedel is not something that is inherited. Those whose relatives made sacrifices for the struggle, as in the case of the auntie, are considered to be potential values (deger). However, in order for them to be considered families of value, they need to pay tribute to the bedels and further their loved ones’ cause by actively involving in the struggle, specifically by participating in the activities of Kurdish organizations. As I explained above, it is through the mediation of these other Kurdish organizations (such as MEYA-DER, TUHAD-FED and Goc-Der) that those who paid (and continue to pay) the largest price become part of Gelawej’s social solidarity network. Participating these organizations is not just a way for these people to demonstrate their allegiance to the Kurdish movement. As I showed in detailing my observations during visits to the homes of politically active beneficiaries of Gelawej, this active involvement also fashions their selves. They acquire and exhibit characteristics (such as confidence, treating others as their equals, avoiding acts of excessive humility and gratefulness), which are interpreted by most members of the Kurdish political community as signs of a decolonized and resistant subjectivity (Chapter 3). Gelawej, as a Kurdish organization, seeks to contribute to the nurturing of such subjectivities especially through the provision of social assistance, mainly because welfare, dominated by the state-sponsored aid programs, is considered to be the domain where allegiance, subservient, hence colonized subjects are produced by the state. In this regard, Xalo Taha’s frustration with the auntie’s submissive and begging attitude is also
a disappointment about the hegemonic power of the debt morality in Turkey on Kurdish society.

Through their emphasis on the debts of the state to the Kurdish people and obligations entailed by bedel, Gelawej and other Kurdish organizations work very hard to undermine this hegemonic debt morality in Turkey, which promotes welfare as state benevolence. Their discourse lays bare the links between decades-long state violence and dispossession and widespread poverty in the region. But Gelawej’s efforts to politicize the domain of welfare are not limited to discursive level. Through their practices that are geared toward empowering their beneficiaries by ruling out the displays of compassion, subservience and gratefulness, they also contribute to the nurturing of resistant socialities and subjectivities that are considered imperative in the struggle for liberation and self-determination in the Kurdish region.
6. Conclusion

My fieldwork between June 2012 and December 2014 overlapped with the first formal peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK. In addition to preventing new deaths, the peace process offered opportunities for the flourishing of alternative politics and governance in the region. During this time dialogue and diplomacy began to shape relations between the Kurdish political community and the Turkish nation-state. A road map to a peaceful resolution of the conflict was drafted and opened to negotiations among all interested parties, including Turkish authorities and Kurdish movement representatives as well as the Turkish and Kurdish public. The denialist attitude of the authorities and many Turks left its place to acknowledgment of the Kurdish identity and political claims and the state’s role in the violence in Kurdistan and suffering of many Kurds throughout the history of the Republic. This peace process (also called a democratic opening) was encouraged and supported by the international community. In line with these surprising and fast-paced developments in Turkey’s domestic politics, the country was regarded as a role model for others in the Middle East as exemplary of democratic politics and governance in the region.

The Turkish state’s recognition of the PKK’s imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan as the main representative of the Kurdish people was celebrated by many Kurds as the first step toward an honorable peace. In 2013 more than one and a half million people joined the Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır, where, for the first time, Öcalan was allowed to address the Kurdish and Turkish public through a letter that he penned in his cell in Imralı Island prison. In his historic letter, Öcalan presented Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP as the first Turkish government that demonstrated a strong will to resolve the conflict through peaceful means. The decades-long armed resistance, during which tens of thousands of Kurds sacrificed their lives and freedom, had come to an end, and
now it was time for the Kurdish people to continue their struggle on democratic and legal grounds.

Considering Öcalan’s letter an order, the PKK declared a cease-fire and started to withdraw its armed units from Turkey. Although Turkish authorities shied away from declaring a cease-fire, they effectively stopped all military operations against the guerrillas and allowed a public sphere where differently situated actors freely discussed social and political problems that led to the Kurdish conflict. In this milder political climate, various components of the Kurdish movement found a chance to put their democratic autonomy project into practice and organize civil society through neighborhood and village councils, NGOs, women’s and labor initiatives, political parties and municipalities. Under the leadership of the Kurdish movement, a new multi-ethnic, multi-religious and progressive umbrella party, HDP, was founded and brought together various segments of the society in Turkey, including Kurds, Alevi, Armenians, Yazidis, leftists, feminists and LGBTIQ.

The June 7, 2015, national election was a landmark for the Kurdish movement and other proponents of democracy in Turkey. Having had a chance to organize their campaign, express their opinions and address their constituency in a relatively peaceful atmosphere without facing the risk of criminalization, HDP won 13.4 percent of the total votes in the June national elections and became the third biggest party in the Turkish parliament. However, this major success of the HDP prevented AKP from winning enough votes to form a majority government, a failure AKP experienced for the first time since its foundation in 2002. The Kurdish public had considered the peace process not as a benevolent endowment by the AKP but rather as an achievement of the Kurdish struggle.
This was not the only success of the Kurdish movement. The Syrian wing of the movement, PYD, had put a similar progressive political project into practice in war-torn northern Syria in an effort to establish democratic confederalism as an alternative to the authoritarian nation-state model imposed by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the religious fundamentalism of various jihadist organizations, including ISIS. The AKP regime considered the HDP’s historic success to be an obstacle to its single-party rule and presented the PYD, which had started to enjoy international recognition and fame for its fight against ISIS, as a threat to Turkey’s territorial sovereignty and national unity.

On July 20, 2015, an alleged ISIS suicide bomber blasted himself in the small Kurdish town of Suruç among hundreds of young Kurdish and leftist Turkish activists who were taking humanitarian aid to Kobane, a war-torn Kurdish town in Syria. Thirty-three were killed, and 104 were injured. ISIS never claimed responsibility for the attack. A suspicious assassination followed the Suruç incident. Two Turkish Special Forces soldiers were found shot in the head in their homes. Although the PKK denied responsibility for the assassination, Turkish authorities nonetheless blamed the organization and retaliated by shelling the PKK’s main base in the Qandil Mountains for days. The peace process had ended.

The violent face of the state manifested itself in full force in the region to such an extent that, seen from under the shadow of the present regime, its far-from-ideal predecessors now appear in retrospect to merit exaltation. Cizre, Sur and other Kurdish towns that were razed during the months-long military blockades and the millions who suffered the worst atrocities and resisted nonetheless paid a heavy price and became bedel in the eyes of many Kurds. The benevolent face of the state was also manifest in this new “war on terror.” Through the provision of various welfare endowments—from pocket money to housing aid to clothing and food assistance—Turkish authorities made
these “victims of terror” objects of their compassion and love in return for their loyalty and obedience to the state. This tough love—which, as I describe in the Introduction, is reflected in the graffiti spray-painted by Turkish Special Forces, “Love is lived in the cellar, darling”—was an instantiation of the eternal recurrence of the same old sovereign dialectic in Kurdistan: state violence and benevolence.

This dissertation has explored the ways in which struggles over sovereignty are waged in the domain of welfare governance in Turkish Kurdistan. Despite the Turkish state’s discourse of democratic governance, its treatment of the population continues to oscillate between granting benevolent endowments to loyal citizens and inflicting violence on the disobedient. This pendulum swing has been more visible in Turkish Kurdistan, a region marked by intense resistance to political and economic centralization and ethnic homogenization policies. Today, this co-presence of state violence and benevolence manifests itself through the widespread state-sponsored welfare programs in the region, in the shadow of an intense “war on terror.”

This paradoxical coupling of counterinsurgency and welfare is usually understood by sociologists and political scientists as a carrot-and-stick strategy designed by the state center to contain the unruly. On the other hand, anthropologists generally analyze this paradox through a framework of disaggregated power effects that congeal around the state. Although these frameworks account for the co-presence of contradictory faces of the state, they rarely examine the articulation of sovereign and governmental practices. This dissertation is an attempt to fill this perceived gap in the literature by tracing the contestation, in the domain of welfare governance, between contradictory forms of indebtedness that have been engendered by struggles over sovereignty.
Debt does not constitute just one of the theoretical frameworks around which I structure my argument. Derived from the field itself, debt has also served as an ethnographic tool with which I have looked at the cultural, moral and economic, as well as political, logic of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. As I detailed in Chapter 2, a certain debt morality historically informs the relation between state and citizens in Turkey. Through the coupling of policies of selective redistribution (to the loyal) and violent dispossession (of the unruly), Turkish citizens have been forced into a state of indebtedness to the Turkish state, with debts to be repaid through allegiance and obedience. Welfare bureaucracy, as I showed in Chapter 4, appears as a domain where this authoritarian debt relation is imposed on beneficiary citizens through the moral judgments of local welfare officials who enjoy an immense discretionary power in selecting “deserving” beneficiaries. By focusing on everyday workings of the Turkish welfare bureaucracy, this dissertation has shown how debt instills sovereign violence into the state’s governmental practices in Kurdistan.

Unlike in the rest of country, the articulation of sovereign violence and the hegemonic debt morality in Turkey are more visible in Kurdistan. Putting a strong emphasis on the history of state violence and state-led dispossession in the region, the Kurdish political community rejects indebtedness (demonstrating allegiance and obedience) to the Turkish state and instead seeks to nurture resistant socialities and subjectivities. In this struggle challenging Turkish authorities’ threats of sovereign violence (threats which find expression in “You shall pay the price!”) gains a particular significance. As I showed in Chapter 3, “paying the price” (bedel ödemek) becomes an obligation to be met in order to claim Kurdish identity. Bedel slips into the interstices of everyday life in Kurdistan, engendering other obligations such as paying tribute to those who paid the price despite the risks involved in this endeavor. By examining how bedel
and its obligations leak into welfare distribution in the region through the moral judgments of Kurdish officials, this dissertation provides a window into the ways in which struggles over sovereignty are waged in the domain of governance.

Whereas welfare governance is mostly dominated by the state-sponsored social assistance programs in the Kurdish region, there are other actors who operate in this domain. Since the mid-2000s, Kurdish party–controlled municipalities and their welfare initiatives have appeared as influential actors shaping the welfare and development discourses and also introducing alternative welfare practices in the region. The overt role played by bedel in these Kurdish municipal initiatives, as I demonstrated in Chapter 5, politicizes welfare governance, especially by rendering it a domain where resistant (instead of allegiant and subservient) socialities and subjectivities are produced.

This dissertation has provided a portrayal of cultural, moral, economic and political dynamics that inform the everyday subtle struggles over sovereignty in Turkish Kurdistan during the peace process. After the end of the short-lived peace process, the dialectic of state violence and benevolence unfolded in a slightly different way in the region. This time, the new “war on terror” was not limited to the “terrorists” on the streets and mountains anymore. Those “traitors” within the state bureaucracy were also targeted. Following the declaration of the state of emergency rule across the country in July 2016, thousands of civil servants (including social assistance officials, teachers, healthcare personnel and academics) were expelled from their jobs overnight on the

\[^{7}\text{The state of emergency law was declared all across Turkey just a couple of days after the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Whereas the rule of emergency was rationalized on the grounds of a fight against the Fettullah Gulen movement, which used to have close connections to the AKP government and allegedly organized the coup, it soon turned into an attack against all dissidents of the government including the Kurdish movement. Inventing a new category called a “terror cocktail,” which helped authorities associate ideologically different organizations such as the Gulen movement, the PKK and the radical Turkish leftist organization DHKP-C under one umbrella, Turkish authorities created the pseudo-legal ground to restrict all civil liberties and rights across the country.}\]
alleged grounds of supporting the PKK, without being granted the right to legal
proceedings. Countless times, President Erdoğan and other Turkish authorities stated
that they would show no mercy to those “traitors,” “most of whom received their
salaries from the state” (Riley 2017). The scope of the purge was expanded beyond those
in state offices who “aided and abetted” the “so-called” citizens. Municipalities
controlled by the Kurdish party took a stronger hit from this “zero tolerance to terror”
policy. Sixty-nine Kurdish mayors were arrested on the alleged grounds of KCK
membership, and government-appointed trustees (kayyum) were installed in their place.
Almost all Kurdish municipality initiatives, including social solidarity networks such as
Gelawej—which tried very hard to provide assistance to the inhabitants of razed towns
despite all obstacles that the Turkish military set before them—were shut down, their
personnel expelled or arrested and their property confiscated.

The Turkish state claims a monopoly of benevolence as well as a monopoly of
violence in the region. The thinner-than-ever line between being the object of state
violence or benevolence is drawn according to a citizen’s perceived credibility, meaning
capacity to pay debts of allegiance and obedience to the state. The now “cleansed” state-
sponsored welfare offices extend a helping hand to the poor Kurds who admit that they
are “victims of the PKK terror.” Newly appointed kayyums of municipalities work very
hard to bring service to the “pacified” Kurdish towns and cities, paving the streets,
collecting garbage, building the demolished infrastructure. President Erdoğan assures
the Turkish nation against “terrorists” and their collaborators every day that “They will
pay the price!”

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78 The total number of expelled civil servants is almost 100,000. However, around ten thousand of these, most
of whom were from the Kurdish region, were purged on the alleged grounds of supporting the PKK. Others
were associated with the Gulen movement, which Turkish authorities nowadays call Fettullah Gulen Terror
Organization (FETO).
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