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Five hundred years of urban food regimes in Istanbul

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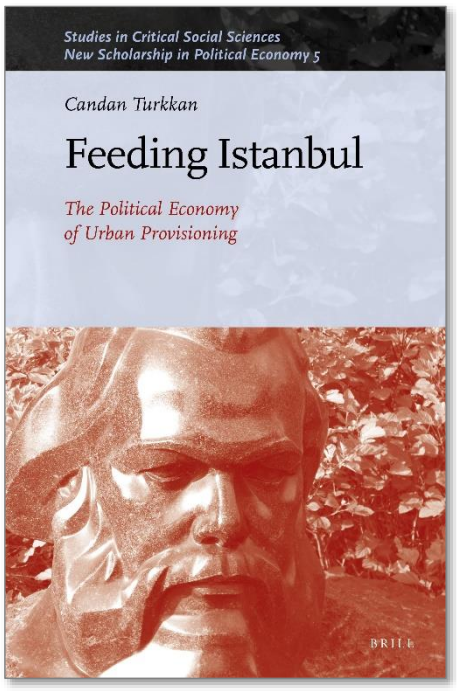

Review of *Feeding Istanbul: The Political Economy of Urban Provisioning,* by Candan Turkkan. (2021). Published by Brill. Available as hardcover, paperback, and eBook (PDF); 260 pages. Publisher's website: https://brill.com/view/title/57002

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Candan Turkkan's *Feeding Istanbul: The Political Economy of Urban Provisioning* begins with an intimate anecdote about her grandmother's experiences of hunger during the Second World War and the centrality of bread in her family. She reflects on the fragility of food systems that belie appearances of food abundance in urban areas and the lasting psychological impacts of hunger. This personal story introduces the focus of the book: the political economies of urban food provisioning in Istanbul.

Feeding Istanbul chronologically discusses food provisioning in Istanbul from the 16th century to the present. Turkkan uses an impressive range of sources, including secondary historical materials, archival documents and collections, and ethnographic research, to suggest that Istanbul has experienced three food regimes, each with unique relationships between the central authority, economics, and food supplies.

The first food regime, spanning the mid-15th century through the late 19th century, was the *urban food provisioning* regime, in which the sultanate intervened heavily to ensure sufficient provisioning of food for Istanbulites. The second, the *codependent provisioning* regime (from the mid-19th century to the 1980s), began with the signing of trade treaties between the Sublime Porte and European powers. It led to a mixed food provisioning approach in which the sultan intervened occasionally while

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allowing markets to determine imports and pricing. Finally, the *urban food supply chain* regime, beginning in the mid-1980s, has seen food provisioning shift to private actors who aimed to accumulate capital through provisioning.

Turkkan's chapter on the urban food provisioning regime adds to scholarship on Ottoman economic incorporation into global supply chains by considering what large-scale economic, structural, and political changes meant for people in the intimate sphere of food provisioning and consumption. Turkkan's ambitious *longue durée* approach encompasses over five hundred years of Istanbul's history. In this food regime, Turkkan argues, the sultan's *kudret* (goodness and legitimacy) correlated with his ability to provide food for his subjects.

The third and fourth chapters on codependent provisioning during the first half of the 20th century use Carl Schmitt's theory of "friends" and "enemies." Turkkan argues that centralizing states use hunger as a form of biopower; these states ensure that their friends are well-placed in food systems, while their enemies may face food scarcity and even starvation. In this food regime, the "politics of death thus becomes the new right to kill, and the market, the new medium of sovereign violence" (p. 124). While this theory is compelling, Turkkan's arguments would have been strengthened by specific examples of the Turkish state using hunger as a form of violence and control against its "enemies."

The final chapters discuss instability and increasing disparities in the urban food supply chain food regime in Istanbul. Turkkan characterizes this food regime, *inter alia*, by the liberalization of economic policies and a decreased focus on import substitution, paired with an increasing focus on export-oriented growth. In the urban food supply chain regime, Istanbulites have become increasingly dependent on global supply chains, and the rights of citizens were in some ways "reduced to commodities and services" that they purchased (p. 182).

The book's most substantial chapter, "Feeding Global Istanbul," uses fieldwork and semi-structured interviews alongside secondary materials. Turkkan outlines major shifts that resulted from economic liberalization, including rural-to-urban migration, massive increases in urban density, and the skyrocketing of informal housing. One particularly compelling aspect discussed in this chapter merited more attention: the story of the relationship between urbanism and food provisioning. Turkkan shows how the relocation of the sultanate from Topkapı to Dolmabahçe in the 19th century, urban-to-rural migration through the 19th and 20th centuries, and the construction of informal housing in the 20th century eventually led to the disappearance of *bostans* and community gardens that had provided fresh produce to Istanbulites. This fascinating story complements similar research on other cities (especially in the field of radical geography) and could have provided a granular example across the three food regimes illustrating how macroeconomic shifts, governmental changes, and urban planning affected urban food production and consumption.

Turkkan concludes by gesturing to the future, suggesting that three major areas of activity will determine Istanbul's provisioning apparatus: changes in population and demographics, continuing expansion of international supermarkets, and the growth of alternative food networks (AFNs) and countermovements (p. 197). The presence of AFNs that cross socioeconomic status suggests widespread dissatisfaction with and resistance to global supply chains and may, in part, shape the future of supply chains in Istanbul and other global cities (since, as Turkkan notes, AFNs are not unique to Istanbul).

While *Feeding Istanbul* makes impressive contributions to theories and case studies of urban food provisioning, it could have been more accessible to wider academic audiences and nonspecialists had Turkkan provided brief explanations of various places, institutions, and organizations. This would have facilitated more cross-regional and interdisciplinary comparative work. For example, the Committee of Union and Progress, central to Turkkan's description and analysis of large-scale changes to Istanbul's food provisioning networks in the early 20th century, is not introduced or explained. Additionally, several scholars who have made critical contributions to understandings of food provisioning in Ottoman Istanbul through focusing on

imarets (public soup kitchens), including Amy Singer and Nina Ergin, were not cited in *Feeding Istanbul*. A focus on charity and emergency food assistance would have widened the scope of Turkkan's descriptions of food access and security.

Throughout this engaging book, Turkkan effectively demonstrates that "food and provisioning were and are among the foundational constituents in the relationship between political communities and their central authorities" (p. 222). *Feeding Istanbul* will be of particular interest to scholars of Ottoman and Turkish history. It would also make a valuable contribution to research and syllabi focusing on economic and social histories of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, complementing work by scholars including Suraya Faroqhi, Amy Singer, and Donald Quataert. Additionally, this book adds much-needed perspectives on food systems and urban supply chains in non-western contexts and provides an excellent model of how to carry out nuanced research that blends archival data with ethnographic research.