

The Cultural Foundations of Informal Economies in Turkey

Abel Polese
Institute of Geography
University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT: The scope of this article is two-fold. On the one hand it explores the meaning of informal economies to Turks, and the narratives by Turks associated with informal economies; on the other one it concentrates on the incapacity of people in Turkey to define them.

To this end, the article will summarize the pertinent literature on informal economies to attempt a conceptualization of the issue, and suggest the existence of a correlation between state-citizen tensions, broadly conceived, and the rise of the informal sector. It will be argued that informal economies are a way to solve the tensions, citizens feel unable to resolve by using formal state institutions. Further, the article explores the cultural perception of the phenomenon of informal economies at the local level. Following the approach suggested by Herzfeld in cultural intimacy, it explores why some narratives seems to contradict, and thus attempt to modify, reality, that is the very existence of informal economies.

Methodologically this article is based on formal surveys in three big cities in Turkey (Istanbul Diyarbakir and Gaziantep) and compares the results with the material collected through informal interviews and participant observation in those same three cities. This comparison will contrast people's perception of themselves with their actions and ideas that often deny the existence of those very connections, alliances or actions that help them to survive or live better.