

# *Atatürk: Beyond a Superstructural Revolutionary – Uncovering the Social, Economic, and Substructural Foundations of the Kemalist Revolution*

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's revolutionary legacy has frequently been interpreted in the academic literature primarily through the lens of cultural and political reforms associated with the superstructure. Such interpretations often reduce the Kemalist transformation to a symbolic process of institutional and cultural modernization, thereby overlooking its broader structural and material dimensions. This study challenges that reductionist perspective by arguing that the Kemalist reform project cannot be understood solely as a series of superstructural interventions. It rather represented a broader socio-economic transformation that reshaped production relations, class structures, and state-society relations in early Republican Türkiye. The early Republican period

constituted a significant historical turning point marked not only by the institutional reorganization of the political order but also by the reconfiguration of economic sovereignty and social power relations. Through policies aimed at industrialization, state-led development, and the restructuring of social hierarchies, the new regime sought to limit the influence of bureaucratic and landowning elites inherited from the imperial era while establishing a developmentalist state framework. However these reforms were implemented under conditions of limited capital accumulation, institutional fragility, and considerable economic constraints. Drawing on a historical institutionalist perspective, this study argues that the Kemalist revolution should be understood not merely as a project of superstructural modernization but as a structural transformation that combined political, economic, and institutional change. From this perspective, Atatürk's reforms appear not simply as cultural or symbolic initiatives but as part of a broader process of state-building and socio-economic reorganization that played a formative role in shaping modern Türkiye.

*Keywords:* Kemalist Revolution, Structural Transformation, Superstructure, State-led Development, Class Recomposition, Institutionalism, Economic Sovereignty.

## ÖZ

SARI AKSAKAL, Betül, **Atatürk: Salt Bir Üstyapı Devrimcisinden Fazlası – Kemalist Devrimin Sosyal, Ekonomik ve Altyapısal Derinliđi**, CTAD, Yıl 22, Sayı 44 (Bahar 2026), s. 159-193.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk'ün devrimci mirası akademik literatürde çođu zaman ađırlıklı olarak kültürel ve siyasal üstyapıya yönelik reformlar üzerinden yorumlanmıştır. Bu tür yaklaşımlar Kemalist dönüşümü büyük ölçüde sembolik bir kurumsal ve kültürel modernleşme süreci olarak ele almakta, böylece söz konusu dönüşümün yapısal ve maddi boyutlarını çođu zaman arka planda bırakmaktadır. Bu çalışma, bu indirgemeci yoruma karşı çıkarak Kemalist reform projesinin yalnızca üstyapısal müdahalelerden ibaret olmadığı argümanını ileri sürmektedir. Aksine, erken Cumhuriyet döneminde üretim ilişkilerini, sınıf yapılarını ve devlet-toplum ilişkilerini yeniden şekillendiren daha geniş kapsamlı bir sosyo-ekonomik dönüşüm söz konusudur. Erken Cumhuriyet dönemi, yalnızca siyasal kurumların yeniden örgütlenmesiyle sınırlı kalmayan, aynı zamanda ekonomik egemenliđin ve toplumsal güç ilişkilerinin yeniden yapılandırıldığı önemli bir tarihsel dönüm noktasıdır. Sanayileşme, devlet öncülüğünde kalkınma ve toplumsal hiyerarşilerin yeniden düzenlenmesi yönündeki politikalar aracılığıyla yeni rejim, imparatorluk döneminden miras kalan bürokratik ve toprak sahibi elitlerin etkisini sınırlamayı ve kalkınmacı bir devlet yapısı inşa etmeyi amaçlamıştır. Bununla birlikte söz konusu reformlar sınırlı sermaye birikimi, kurumsal kırılmalık ve ciddi ekonomik kısıtlar altında hayata geçirilmiştir. Tarihsel kurumsalcı bir perspektife dayanan bu çalışma, Kemalist devrimin yalnızca üstyapısal bir modernleşme projesi olarak deđil, siyasal, ekonomik ve kurumsal deđişimleri

bir araya getiren yapısal bir dönüşüm olarak değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Bu açıdan bakıldığında Atatürk reformları yalnızca kültürel ya da sembolik değişimler olarak değil, modern Türkiye'nin oluşumunda belirleyici rol oynayan daha geniş kapsamlı bir devlet inşası ve sosyo-ekonomik yeniden yapılanma sürecinin parçası olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* Kemalist devrim, yapısal dönüşüm, üstyapı, devlet öncülüğünde kalkınma, sınıfsal yeniden yapılanma, kurumsalcılık, ekonomik egemenlik.

## **Introduction**

The figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Türkiye and the principal architect of its anti-imperialist transformation, has long occupied a central place in historical and political debates. While conventional nationalist narratives often portray Atatürk's leadership in heroic terms, a significant body of scholarship in economics, political science, and historiography has approached the subject more critically. Within this literature, the Kemalist reform program is frequently interpreted primarily as a superstructural transformation centred on legal, cultural, and institutional reforms rather than as a process of deep socio-economic change. Although these interpretations differ in their analytical perspectives, they tend to converge in downplaying the material and structural dimensions of the Kemalist transformation.

This article challenges such reductionist readings. It argues that the Kemalist revolution should be understood as a historically specific process in which structural and superstructural transformations unfolded simultaneously. Rather than representing a limited project of elite-driven modernization or institutional imitation, the Kemalist program involved a broader reconfiguration of political sovereignty, economic autonomy, and social relations. The reforms implemented under Atatürk's leadership were therefore not merely symbolic or externally derived institutional adjustments. Instead, they formed part of a broader strategy aimed at establishing a sovereign and developmental state in the aftermath of imperial collapse and within the volatile global context of the interwar period.

The analysis adopts a historically grounded institutional perspective and proceeds in several stages. First, it examines the structural crises that contributed to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, focusing on economic fragmentation, military defeat, and geopolitical disintegration. These conditions shaped the historical environment in which Kemalist ideology emerged. In this context, Kemalism is interpreted as an intellectual and political project that linked national independence with economic emancipation, grounding its legitimacy not only in

territorial sovereignty but also in the transformation of production relations and state–society relations.

The article then turns to the early years of the Republic after 1923, when the new state faced significant institutional weaknesses, fiscal constraints, and socio-economic disruption. Despite these limitations, the Kemalist leadership pursued a program of reconstruction that sought to avoid both orthodox liberalism and dependence on foreign capital. This developmental trajectory, initially cautious in character, gained momentum following the global economic crisis of 1929. The crisis played an important role in encouraging a more interventionist model of state-led development, eventually culminating in the First Five-Year Industrial Plan of 1933–1934.

Finally, the article examines the place of populism within the Kemalist ideological framework. In this context, populism is not treated as a form of political demagoguery but as a governing principle aimed at mobilizing popular classes and legitimizing social and economic reforms. Through these policies, the Kemalist revolution contributed to the reconfiguration of economic and social relations while laying the institutional foundations of a republican model of modernity that combined national sovereignty, social reform, and developmentalism. By reassessing these dynamics, the article seeks to reposition the Kemalist revolution as a significant example of post-imperial state formation and structural transformation.

### **Atatürk and the Myth of the Superstructure Revolution: A Critical Reappraisal**

The widespread claim that Atatürk’s revolution failed to address the major economic challenges of the early Republican period and did not produce meaningful economic transformation has become a recurring argument in parts of the scholarly literature. Yet this critique often rests on a problematic assumption: that Atatürk neglected what is commonly described as a structural revolution—namely, the radical transformation of production relations and the redistribution of economic power. Reconsidering this claim requires a careful engagement with the theoretical distinction between structure and superstructure.

Within Marxist theoretical discourse, the concept of structure refers to the economic relations of production that organize material life. It includes the forces and relations of production through which societies produce and reproduce their material conditions of existence. In classical Marxist thought, this economic base plays a determining role in shaping the superstructure, which encompasses the political, legal, ideological, and cultural institutions of society.

From this perspective, labor, production, and material conditions are understood as the primary drivers of historical change.

The superstructure—comprising institutions such as law, politics, philosophy, religion, and culture—does not exist independently of the economic base. Rather, it reflects and helps stabilize the prevailing economic order.<sup>1</sup> As Karl Marx argued, the organization and ownership of the means of production form the foundation upon which the broader social and institutional structure is built. The contradictions embedded within these economic relations become visible through class struggle, which in turn manifests itself in political, ideological, and cultural forms. In this sense, superstructural institutions are not autonomous forces but are shaped by the underlying material conditions of society.<sup>2</sup> Within this conceptual framework, critiques claiming that Atatürk's revolution failed to produce a structural transformation require careful reconsideration. Such arguments often assume that the absence of an immediate or radical reconfiguration of production relations necessarily implies the absence of structural change. Yet this interpretation risks overlooking the complex ways in which political, institutional, and ideological reforms may interact with—and gradually reshape—the underlying economic structure.

A salient critique of Atatürk's revolutionary paradigm is articulated by Bülent Ecevit, the third leader of the party founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In his work *Atatürk and Revolutionism*, Ecevit argues that Atatürk's reforms largely remained within the superstructural sphere—symbolic and institutional changes that did not fundamentally transform the socio-economic base. According to Ecevit, although these reforms dismantled several long-standing socio-cultural institutions—such as the establishment of popular sovereignty, secularism, the formation of the nation-state, the adoption of the Latin alphabet, and reforms in dress and public life—they did not lead to a substantive transformation of the structural foundations of Turkish society or significantly improve the living conditions of the broader population. Ecevit further maintains that these reforms did not challenge entrenched patterns of oppression and exploitation; changes such as replacing the fez with the hat, reforms in clothing, the unveiling of women, and the institutionalization of secularism functioned largely as visible symbols of change, while widespread poverty and structural inequality persisted.<sup>3</sup>

The liberalizing environment created by the 1961 Constitution contributed to notable developments in Türkiye's public and intellectual life, most visibly

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<sup>1</sup> Barlas Tolan, *Sosyoloji*, Adım, Ankara 1993, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Kapital III*, Translator Ahmet Bilgin, Sol, Ankara 1978, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup> Bülent Ecevit, *Ortann Solu Kim*, İstanbul, 1966, pp. 63-69.

reflected in the emergence of *Yön* magazine. Founded in Ankara on December 20, 1961, *Yön* quickly became a prominent voice of the leftist opposition in the aftermath of the May 27 coup. The journal's central concern and ideological orientation focused on the question of Türkiye's socio-economic development. Dođan Avciođlu, a leading figure of the *Yön* movement, argued that despite gradual changes, the social structure remained largely embedded within a capitalist framework that was slowly shedding its primitive, dependent, and feudal elements.<sup>4</sup> According to this interpretation, the continued influence of feudal and landowning elites indicated that Atatürk's revolution had not penetrated the foundational layers of society and had largely remained confined to the superstructural sphere, without fundamentally transforming the social base.<sup>5</sup>

According to Avciođlu,<sup>6</sup> the Atatürk era failed to implement a fundamental land reform within the framework of a strong statist agenda, thereby denying the masses a meaningful opportunity to overcome their entrenched economic subordination and the political marginalization that accompanied it. Furthermore, industrialization—one of the central objectives of statism—did not lead to the emergence of a proletariat, widely regarded as a defining outcome of industrial society, and therefore failed to generate the conditions necessary for class organization and political consciousness. In Avciođlu's view, this limitation weakened the structural transformation required for class struggle and consequently hindered the deeper social change expected from a revolutionary process.

Mümtaz Soysal, a founding figure of the journal *Yön*, argued in his doctoral dissertation *Political Mechanism for Democratic Economic Planning* that a coherent and unified outlook supportive of planned development was largely absent within the state apparatus. He further maintained that concrete efforts to establish such a developmental perspective remained limited. According to Soysal, the architects of economic planning were not individual visionaries but institutional structures and political mechanisms, whose effectiveness was significantly constrained by the absence of ideological consensus and strategic determination.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mehmed Kemal, *Sol Kavgası*, May, İstanbul: May, 1975, p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> Dođan Avciođlu, *Türkiye'nin Düzeni 2*, Tekin, İstanbul 1998, p. 1099.

<sup>6</sup> Dođan Avciođlu, *Türkiye'nin Düzeni: Dün, Bugün, Yarın I*, Tekin Ankara 1990, p. 353.

<sup>7</sup> Mümtaz Soysal, *Demokratik Planlama İçin Siyasi Mekanizma*, Ph.D. Thesis, Ankara University, Social Sciences İnstitute, Ankara 1958, p. 8.

Among the prominent critiques is that of Bahri Savcı,<sup>8</sup> a Turkish political scientist known for his leftist perspectives in the 1960s. Savcı acknowledged Atatürk as a pioneering figure who laid the foundations for social and economic modernization. However, he argued that the emerging socio-economic framework underlying this modernization lacked the necessary human capital and institutional capacity to sustain meaningful development. According to Savcı, this deficiency contributed to a series of structural problems, including rapid population growth, declining agricultural productivity, stagnation in animal husbandry, the failure to develop a strong industrial base, rising unemployment, limited access to education, widespread poverty, and the persistence of broader socio-economic difficulties.

Contemporary critiques, exemplified by the Turkish intellectual and journalist Taha Akyol—known for his writings on the Republican era—argue that Atatürk’s reforms lacked substantial structural transformation. In 2008, during televised discussions on *Aykırı Sorular* (Sky Türk TV) and *Tarafsız Bölge* (CNN Türk TV), Akyol characterized Atatürk primarily as a cultural revolutionary and suggested that he did not pursue comprehensive economic reform. He also referred to the Turkish History Congress of 1932, noting that Atatürk’s first congress explicitly focused on economic issues was the 1930 Industry Congress. Furthermore, drawing on economic analyses by Şevket Pamuk and Yahya Sezai Tezel, Akyol argued that Türkiye’s economic growth during Atatürk’s tenure remained below the global average.<sup>9</sup> Such an interpretation, however, risks overlooking the broader scope of Atatürk’s reform agenda, which included wide-ranging efforts toward nationalization and modernization that brought together economic, social, and cultural dimensions. The complexities of these reforms will be examined in greater detail in the following sections.

Turkish sociologist and intellectual Emre Kongar offers a critical framework for understanding the nature of the Kemalist revolution. Kongar<sup>10</sup> guesses that the origins of the revolution were fundamentally ideological and political, reflecting the profound rupture between the Ottoman imperial order and the emerging republican system. According to Kongar, this superstructural transformation generated significant and lasting changes in Türkiye’s socio-economic structure. More specifically, he suggests that although Atatürk’s revolution initially focused on the transformation of the superstructure, it gradually influenced and reshaped the economic base, effectively producing a

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<sup>8</sup> Bahri Savcı, *Atatürk ve Çağdaş Türkiye*, Varlık, İstanbul 1981 pp. 9-12, Bahri Savcı, *Demokratik Gelişmemizin Başarıya Ulaşma Problemleri*, Yön, 1963, İstanbul.

<sup>9</sup> Ali Sümer, *İktisat-Siyaset-Sosyoloji Üçgeninde Cumhuriyet*, Evrim, İstanbul 2012, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> Emre Kongar, *İmparatorluktan Günümüze Türkiye'nin Toplumsal Yapısı*, Remzi, İstanbul 1981.

structural transformation through strategic superstructural reforms.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the process reflects the view that durable revolutionary change requires transformations in both structure and superstructure, with cultural change playing a crucial role. From this perspective, Kongar argues that the Kemalist cultural transformation contributed to the emergence of a relatively liberal political regime in Türkiye despite significant structural limitations, highlighting the close relationship between cultural reform and economic change in revolutionary processes.

Prevailing narratives often portray Atatürk solely as a superstructural revolutionary, arguing that he lacked both the opportunity and the vision to initiate fundamental transformations of the economic base.<sup>12</sup> Such interpretations tend to depict him as a pragmatist shaped primarily by immediate circumstances rather than as a deliberate architect of systemic change. Yet challenging these reductive portrayals requires a closer engagement with Atatürk's economic ideas and practices, particularly those aimed at reshaping the relations of social production and allowing revolutionary change to extend into the socio-economic foundations of society. This study therefore seeks to examine these dimensions in detail by analyzing Atatürk's economic thought and policy orientation, highlighting their role in extending the transformative scope of the revolution beyond the limits of purely superstructural reforms.

### **Committee of Union and Progress: A Protracted Reckoning with Imperialism as the Crucible of the Kemalist Revolution**

The prelude to the National War of Independence was marked by a group of intellectuals confronting deep economic disintegration and searching for a path toward national recovery. This period represents the formative stage in the emergence of the ethos of independence. The Ottoman Empire, long described as the "sick man of Europe," stood on the brink of collapse, its sovereignty severely weakened by overwhelming debt and increasing foreign control. The Düyün-u Umumiye functioned as a powerful financial institution that extracted imperial revenues while sustaining the Empire through successive loans, delaying its collapse but further entrenching economic dependency.<sup>13</sup>

Europe's financial ascendancy was closely linked to the advanced development of its institutions of governance and administration, as well as its

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<sup>11</sup> Kongar, *Ibid*, p. 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Tahir Tamer Kumkale, *Atatürk'ün ekonomi mucizesi*, Pegasus, İstanbul, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Emin Türk Eliçin, *Kemalist Devrim İdeolojisi*, Sarmal, İstanbul 1996, p. 132.

sustained commitment to scientific progress.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, sections of the emerging Ottoman intelligentsia often remained insufficiently attentive to the profound transformations taking place in the West, including the decline of feudal structures, the Industrial Revolution, and the rapid expansion of scientific knowledge. This intellectual gap influenced successive reformist movements, including the Young Turks and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). At the same time, the Ottoman state's growing military expenditures further strained an already fragile financial structure. Nevertheless, the pressures and policies imposed by European powers during these conflicts contributed to the rise of a new national consciousness within the Empire.<sup>15</sup> The CUP emerged as one of the main political expressions of this developing nationalism, culminating in the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Monarchy on July 23–24, 1908, after which it quickly became the dominant political and military force in the Empire.<sup>16</sup> Following the 1908 Revolution, economic thought also began to shift, as CUP leaders increasingly recognized that political sovereignty was closely tied to economic autonomy.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the Empire's crisis came to be understood as the outcome of deep financial dependency and economic subordination.<sup>18</sup>

Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk played an active role within the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and contributed to its intellectual environment, his economic and social views diverged significantly from the dominant outlook of this circle. This divergence is reflected in remarks he reportedly made in 1908, at the age of twenty-seven, to a foreign scholar: “What I am about to say may sound like a dream to you, but I will make it happen: the sultanate will be abolished; women will be liberated from the veil and take their rightful place in social life; and the letters that distance us from Western civilization will be changed.”<sup>19</sup> Although the 1908 Revolution introduced a constitutional regime based on political parties, parliamentary elections, and a constitutional framework, Atatürk sought to accompany this political transformation with far-reaching social

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<sup>14</sup> Şükrü Hanioglu, *Bir Siyasal Düşünür Olarak Dr. Abdullah Cevdet ve Dönemi*, İletişim, İstanbul 1985, pp. 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> Aysu Özçaylak, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Ekonomisinde Yerli Malı Politikaları ve Uygulamaları*, Atatürk Research Center Ankara 2017, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Özçaylak, *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Zafer Toprak, *Milli İktisat-Millî Burjuvazi*, Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul 1995, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> François Georgeon, *Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Kökenleri Yusuf Akçura (1876-1935)*, Translator Alev Er, Turkish Economic and Social History Foundation Publications, İstanbul 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmet Taner Kışlalı, *Kemalizm, Laiklik ve Demokrasi*, Kırmızı Kedi, İstanbul 2018, p. 25.

reforms.<sup>20</sup> However, these ideas were not embraced by the CUP, which remained largely committed to preserving the imperial structure.<sup>21</sup> Atatürk, by contrast, openly acknowledged the decline of the Ottoman Empire and argued that the only viable path forward was the establishment of a new Turkish state grounded in popular sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> For him, independence was not merely a political objective but a fundamental condition for the survival of the state.<sup>23</sup>

Under the rule of the Committee of Union and Progress, the Ottoman Empire entered a series of wars that severely weakened its territorial integrity and political authority. The 1913 coup consolidated the CUP's control but also accelerated the Empire's decline. Its alliance with Germany in the First World War ultimately proved decisive, ending with the Allied occupation of Istanbul in 1918. In this context of collapse, Atatürk landed in Samsun in 1919, launching the Turkish War of Independence and marking the beginning of the Kemalist revolution. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) confirmed this victory, and on October 29, 1923, the Republic of Türkiye was proclaimed, bringing the Ottoman era to an end and inaugurating a new political order.

### **Reconstructing a Nation: The Sociopolitical and Economic Landscape of the Early Republican Türkiye**

The Republic of Türkiye emerged from the long and complex legacy of the six-century-old Ottoman Empire.<sup>24</sup> Following a prolonged period of conflict—from the Balkan Wars to the First World War and ultimately the War of Independence—the new state was founded under conditions of profound devastation. These successive wars severely weakened the country's productive capacity, drastically reduced the male population, and caused extensive damage to both human and physical resources. By the time the Republic was proclaimed, much of the country bore the marks of prolonged warfare, with large parts of its territory left economically and socially exhausted.<sup>25</sup>

The country was marked by widespread disruption and social dislocation. A substantial portion of the non-Muslim population had departed, and the cumulative impact of successive wars resulted in the loss of at least 2.5 million Turks. By 1923, the population of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace had declined to

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<sup>20</sup> Niyazi Berkes, *Atatürk ve Devrimler*, Yapı Kredi, İstanbul 2020, p.156.

<sup>21</sup> Kongar, *Ibid*, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> Şeref Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri*. (Ankara: İşbank Publications, 1964), pp. 225-230.

<sup>23</sup> Kongar, *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Kongar, *Ibid*, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Kışlalı, *Ibid*, p. 24.

13,269,606.<sup>26</sup> The economic consequences were equally severe: foreign trade contracted dramatically, with exports falling from 2.5 billion kuruş in 1911 to 800 million kuruş in 1923, while imports declined from 4.5 billion to 1.4 billion kuruş during the same period.<sup>27</sup> Inflation also accelerated sharply; the retail price index rose from 100 in 1914 to 1,279 in 1923 and continued to increase throughout the remainder of the decade.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the Republic inherited from the Ottoman Empire a population that was economically impoverished, socially exhausted, and deeply demoralized.

The newly founded Republic of Türkiye inherited a highly fragile and impoverished socioeconomic structure. In its early years, per capita gross national product stood at only 65 US dollars, or 108 Turkish liras—figures that clearly illustrate the depth of national poverty.<sup>29</sup> Annual exports totaled 51 million dollars, while imports reached 87 million dollars, resulting in a substantial trade deficit. Agriculture dominated the export structure, accounting for 78 percent of total exports, followed by industry with 20 percent and mining with only 2 percent.

The only national bank inherited from the Ottoman Empire was Ziraat Bank.<sup>30</sup> The agricultural sector accounted for 67 percent of the gross national product, while services contributed 23 percent and industry only 10 percent. Rural life predominated, with 82 percent of the population living in villages, and literacy levels were strikingly low—below 11 percent<sup>31</sup> overall and as low as 3 percent in some regions.<sup>32</sup> The number of individuals with higher education

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<sup>26</sup> The population, which was 16-18 million in the 1914 census of the Ministry of National Defense, decreased to 13 million in 1927. In the first official census conducted in 1927, the population was around 13 million, except for Hatay. Based on this, it is estimated that around 13 million people lived in Türkiye in 1923. See Oktay Yenal, *Cumhuriyet'in İktisat Tarihi*, Paymaş. İstanbul 2001, p. 23. This small population was a decrepit, low-income group. The men who died in the wars disrupted the male-female balance and the age pyramid regarding the workforce in the fertile age. In the 1927 census, that is, four years after the proclamation of the Republic, the male population was 7 percent less than the female population. See also Yenal, *idem*, p. 23; Metin Kopar, *Atatürk Dönemi İktisadi Kalkınma*, Bilge Kültür Sanat, İstanbul, 2013, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Kopar, *ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Barış Doster, "Cumhuriyet'in İktisattaki Anlamı: Devletçilik, Halkçılık, Planlama" in *Cumhuriyet'in Ekonomi Politikası*, Tarihçi, İstanbul, 2019, pp.9-34.

<sup>31</sup> İsmail Türk, *Atatürk ve Türk Mali Sistemi: Atatürk Dönemi Ekonomi Politikası ve Türkiye'nin Ekonomik Gelişmesi*, Ankara University Publications, 1982, No:513, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Yenal, *ibid*, p. 24.

scarcely exceeded 3,000, most of whom were military officers, members of the clergy, physicians, or teachers.<sup>33</sup> In short, there was a severe shortage of trained personnel capable of administering and developing a modern economic system. Despite these challenging conditions, however, the Republic of Türkiye was established and sustained through considerable determination and resolve.

### **Navigating Independence through Moderate Statism: Economic, Political, Social, and Military Strategies in the Early Republic (1923–1929)**

The year 1923 marked a decisive turning point with the formal establishment of the republican regime as the foundational structure of the new state, enshrined as the first article of the Constitution by the Turkish Grand National Assembly. This republican framework represented a fundamental rupture with the imperial past and introduced a political order grounded in the principle of popular sovereignty.<sup>34</sup> At the core of the National Pact—the guiding framework of the new Republic—stood the principle of full national sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> This commitment to sovereignty also formed a central pillar of Atatürk’s economic vision. His well-known statement, “Freedom and independence are my character,” reflected a firm determination to preserve national autonomy. Atatürk clearly recognized that the burden of foreign debt, first incurred during the Crimean War in 1854, had played a crucial role in the Ottoman Empire’s financial deterioration and eventual collapse.

Understanding Atatürk’s economic vision requires close attention to the İzmir Economic Congress held on February 17, 1923, where the economic direction of the emerging Republic and its principal challenges were openly debated. Convened roughly eight months before the formal proclamation of the Republic and during the temporary suspension of the Lausanne negotiations, the Congress represented a critical moment in Türkiye’s nation-building process. In his opening address, Atatürk emphasized that economic strength was inseparable from the survival and vitality of the nation.<sup>36</sup> From his perspective, economic sovereignty constituted a fundamental prerequisite for genuine political independence. As he stated at the Congress, national sovereignty could only be secured through economic sovereignty. Achieving such autonomy, however, required continued political struggle even after the military victories that had

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<sup>33</sup> Türk, *ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Kışlalı, *ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Gotthard Jaeschke, *Kurtuluş Savaşı ile İlgili İngiliz Belgeleri*, Translator Cemal Köprülü, TTK Publications, Ankara 1991, pp. 208-209.

<sup>36</sup> Gülay Akgül Yılmaz, *Türkiye’de 1923-1938 Dönemi Maliye Politikası Uygulamaları*. Marmara University Journal of the Faculty of Economic & Administrative Sciences, 2009, 27/2, pp. 299.

secured territorial integrity. A central component of this struggle was the abolition of the capitulations—legal arrangements that had exposed the Ottoman economy to foreign goods, services, and capital, thereby deepening its economic dependency. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed on July 24, 1923, formally abolished these capitulations, confirming Türkiye’s financial independence and reinforcing the political and economic sovereignty of the new Republic.<sup>37</sup>

The economy of the newly established Republic of Türkiye was overwhelmingly agrarian and constrained by limited technological capacity. It faced a severe shortage of entrepreneurial capital, an underdeveloped economic structure, a limited skilled workforce, and a bureaucratic apparatus that lacked the capacity to mobilize and allocate scarce resources effectively.<sup>38</sup> Founded in 1924, İşbank played an important role not only in providing financial support to trade and industry but also in contributing to the development of Türkiye’s emerging capital markets. By assuming an active role in industrial and commercial enterprises, the bank served as a key instrument in the country’s early efforts toward economic modernization and structural transformation.<sup>39</sup> In 1925, the national banking sector expanded further with the establishment of the Industry and Mines Bank of Türkiye. This institution was created to extend industrial credit to the private sector, administer factories transferred to the state, and participate in industrial ventures through partnerships with private enterprises, thereby supporting the country’s industrial development.<sup>40</sup>

Sugar factories were systematically established across the country, particularly in Eskişehir, Uşak, and Alpullu, reflecting the state’s strategic prioritization of sugar production as an essential consumer good. Through Law No. 724, enacted on January 25, 1926, the government assumed exclusive control over sugar imports, thereby strengthening its capacity to regulate and support the national sugar industry.<sup>41</sup> Following the opening of the first sugar factory in Alpullu in 1927, further efforts were directed toward the development of the cotton sector, while policies were introduced to reduce the importation of wheat and flour in order to promote greater self-sufficiency in staple agricultural products.<sup>42</sup> At the

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<sup>37</sup> Sadi İrmak, *Atatürk Devrimleri Tarihi (İdeoloji ve Tarih Açısından İnceleme)*, Yapı Kredi, İstanbul, p. 220.

<sup>38</sup> Kongar, *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Yıldırım Koç, *Atatürk ve Sosyalizm*, Berfin, İstanbul 2022, p. 71.

<sup>42</sup> İsmet Giritli, *Kemalist İdeoloji: Siyasi ve Ekonomik Yönleri*, Yaşar Education and Culture Foundation Publications, No. 9, 1981.

same time, the Republic deliberately refrained from imposing a tax regime that would place additional burdens on farmers and peasants. One of the most consequential economic reforms of the early republican period was the abolition of the Ařar Tax on February 17, 1925, a measure intended to alleviate rural hardship and stimulate agricultural production.<sup>43</sup> Although the tax had constituted 27.9 percent of state revenues in the 1923 budget<sup>44</sup>, its abolition signaled a decisive departure from Ottoman fiscal practices.<sup>45</sup> As Atatürk noted, “*The Ařar tax is a wound that festers into gangrene upon the body of the public economy; the true state of the treasury becomes evident when one contemplates the obstacles impeding agricultural development. This regressive tax system had long reinforced landlord dominance and facilitated the exploitation of the peasantry.*”<sup>46</sup> In an effort to weaken these structures and ease rural inequalities, the 1925 Land Reform Law (No. 716) redistributed 731,000 acres of land to 22,233 peasant families under long-term repayment conditions extending over two decades. At the same time, agricultural credit expanded significantly—from 22 million to 100 million Turkish liras—while interest rates were reduced from 12 percent to 9 percent, reflecting a policy orientation aimed at strengthening small-scale producers and gradually reshaping agrarian relations.<sup>47</sup>

The government also implemented policies aimed at promoting agricultural cooperatives and encouraging mechanization, particularly through the introduction of tractors, while pursuing broader structural improvements in the agricultural sector. These efforts included the establishment of model farms, nurseries, and seed-breeding institutes, reflecting a deliberate commitment to modernizing and increasing the productivity of Turkish agriculture.<sup>48</sup> Another significant development during this period was the enactment of the Encouragement of Industry Law in 1927, which offered substantial incentives to enterprises that expanded mechanization, increased production, and created employment opportunities, thereby supporting industrial growth and economic modernization.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Giritli, *ibid*, 1981, p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> Kopar, *ibid*, p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> Mustafa Aysan, *Atatürk Döneminin Ekonomi Politikaları*, Sinerji, İzmit, 2007 p. 75.

<sup>46</sup> Duran Bülbül, *Kemalist Ekonomi Modeli*, Cumhuriyet, İstanbul, 2020, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Tevfik Çavdar, Bilsay Kuruç, Erdinç Tokgöz, Turhan Olcaytu, Yücel Ülken. *Atatürk Dönemi İktisat Politikası*, Istanbul University Faculty of Economics Alumni Publications, İstanbul, 1981, p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Çavdar et al., *Ibid*, 1981, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Çavdar, Kuruç et al. *Atatürk Dönemi İktisat Politikası*, p. 39.

Atatürk's revolution should be understood not as a superficial transformation confined to the political or ideological superstructure, but as a broader and more systemic process that reshaped the social, economic, and institutional foundations of the Republic.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, Atatürk can be regarded as a key architect of structural transformation. At a time when the national budget remained below 150 million liras—and when fiscal resources were extremely limited—he nevertheless moved decisively to abolish the Aşar tax. This significant fiscal reform, aimed at alleviating the burden on the peasantry, represented a major departure from Ottoman taxation practices and reflected the early Republic's broader effort to restructure rural economic relations.

As discussed in earlier sections, Avciöğlü argued that a comprehensive land reform could not be fully realized under the framework of strong statism during the Atatürk era, leaving peasants unable to escape entrenched forms of economic and political subordination.<sup>51</sup> Yet the issue of land reform had already been anticipated in the 1924 Constitution. Despite these intentions, entrenched social alliances and structural constraints limited the implementation of such reforms, and the question of land redistribution gained greater prominence only in the 1930s. For this reason, attributing the incomplete realization of land reform solely to Atatürk's relatively short political tenure would be misleading, particularly given that the issue has remained unresolved in later periods as well.<sup>52</sup> As Cengiz Akseki observes, "For many years, it has been impossible to achieve comparable levels of stability and comfort amid the complexities of multilayered economic challenges."<sup>53</sup> In periods marked by economic hardship, the republican reforms were therefore often dismissed as merely superstructural changes that failed to generate tangible improvements in social welfare. Critics argued that, in the absence of visible gains in living standards, these transformations remained detached from the socioeconomic realities of the population.<sup>54</sup> However, this narrative misrepresents the reality. However, such interpretations overlook important developments in the early republican economy. Between 1923 and 1929, the agricultural sector received substantial state support, contributing to noticeable improvements in rural livelihoods. Agricultural production expanded

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<sup>50</sup> Erol Cihan, "Atatürk İnkılabı Yorumları", *Journal of Istanbul University Law Faculty*, Vol. 45, Issue 1-4, 1981, pp. 122

<sup>51</sup> Avciöğlü, 1990, *Ibid*, pp. 353-354.

<sup>52</sup> Irmak, *Ibid*, pp. 31-33.

<sup>53</sup> Cengiz Akseki, "Atatürk Devrimlerinde Yöntem I: Ortam ve Lider", *Belgi Dergisi*, 3, 2012, pp. 265-293.

<sup>54</sup> Çavdar, 2003, *Ibid*, p. 341; Seyhan Erdoğan, "İzmir İktisat Kongresi-1923", *Aydınlık Sosyalist Dergi*, 1969, pp. 287-308.

rapidly during this period, averaging approximately 12 percent annually between 1924 and 1929<sup>55</sup>, and consistently outpacing industrial growth—an outcome that reflects the early Republic’s strategic prioritization of agricultural recovery in the aftermath of war<sup>56</sup>. Correspondingly, agriculture’s share of gross national product increased from 39.8 percent in 1923 to 45.8 percent in 1929, representing an average annual increase of 9.3 percent.<sup>57</sup>

### **Overcoming Economic Decline through the Cultural Revolution: Targeting Archaic Legacies**

Atatürk held the conviction that revolutionary reforms could achieve lasting impact only if the process of transformation continued without interruption.<sup>58</sup> His reforms therefore encompassed economic, social, and cultural dimensions simultaneously.<sup>59</sup> Atatürk clearly recognized that sustainable development required a transformation of social consciousness. In his view, a new economic and social order could not be established without first reshaping the collective mindset, making superstructural change a necessary condition for deeper structural transformation. From a materialist perspective, Türkiye faced structural constraints similar to those encountered by other late-developing societies: limited capital, scarce technology, and a shortage of skilled labor. Under these conditions, the rapid cultivation of a technically trained and socially mobilized workforce became essential for supporting the emerging industrial economy. This process required the gradual elimination of restrictive traditions, entrenched social practices, and institutional barriers that constrained modernization, alongside the broader re-education of society. Such transformation was conceived as part of a broader cultural revolution intended to facilitate national modernization and social reorganization.

Atatürk emphasized the close relationship between economic development and education at the İzmir Economic Congress. Consistent with this vision, the education system was reorganized and secularized through the Law on the Unification of Instruction enacted on March 3, 1924. With this reform, the state assumed full responsibility for primary education, marking an important step in

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<sup>55</sup> Yenal, *Ibid*, p. 79.

<sup>56</sup> Korkut Boratav, “Kemalist Economic Policies and Etatism,” in *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State*, ed. Ali Kazancıgil and Ergun Özbudun (London: Hurst & Company, 1981), 165–190; Şevket Pamuk, *Uneven Centuries: Economic Development of Turkey since 1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>57</sup> Çavdar, 2003, *Ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>58</sup> Hikmet Özdemir, *Atatürk’ü Yeniden Düşünmek*, Remzi, İstanbul, p. 158.

<sup>59</sup> Irmak, 1981, *ibid*, p. 27.

the modernization of the country's educational structure and the formation of a republican civic order.<sup>60</sup> As primary education expanded, increasing emphasis was placed on vocational and technical training in order to support the broader process of industrialization. The objective was to cultivate a new generation equipped with the skills and outlook required by the modern age. İnönü described this reform as a foundational transformation, stating: "Our aim in education is to raise citizens who are civilized and creative, to enhance the cultural values of our national society, and to increase its productive and economic capacity." Educational institutions were secularized, removed from religious supervision, and reorganized under the authority of the Ministry of National Education, supported by dedicated public funding. Between 1923 and 1929, the number of primary schools increased from 4,900 to 6,000, while enrollment rose from 342,000 to 479,000 students.<sup>61</sup> In 1928, literacy reform was further advanced with the adoption of the Latin alphabet.

In the early years of the Republic, literacy, education, and vocational training levels among the population were extremely limited. By 1927, illiteracy among individuals aged ten and above had reached 91.8 percent, representing a major obstacle to social and economic development.<sup>62</sup> In response, the government placed increasing emphasis on expanding national education. This priority was reflected in the gradual rise of education spending within the state budget, which increased from 3.17 percent in 1927 to 5.87 percent by 1938. During the period between 1925 and 1930, education's share of the budget remained around 3.27 percent,<sup>63</sup> marking the early phase of this broader transformation. Atatürk repeatedly stressed that the Republic could no longer remain a society shaped by traditional religious hierarchies but instead had to be guided by reason and scientific knowledge.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, the abolition of religious orders, the closure of dervish lodges, and major reforms in education, language, and literacy—including the adoption of the Latin alphabet—formed part of a broader cultural transformation aimed at dismantling inherited institutional structures and promoting a modern, secular, and scientifically oriented society.

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<sup>60</sup> Bülül, *ibid*, p. 119; Banu Turnaoğlu, *The Formation of Turkish Republicanism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Yenal, *ibid*, p. 69.

<sup>62</sup> Salim Neysari, *Türkiye'de Alfabenin Değişimi İstidlal ve Neticeleri. Atatürk Önderliğinde Kültür Devrimi, Kalkınma İçin Bölgesel İşbirliği*, Seminar Papers, Turkish Revolution History Institute Publications, No: 12, Ankara, 1972, pp. 107-110.

<sup>63</sup> Kopar, *ibid*, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> Cem Apaydın, "Belgeler Işığında Tekke, Zaviye Ve Türbelerin Kapatılması Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme" *Yakın Dönem Türkiye Araştırmaları*, Vol. 16, No. 32, 2017, p. 152.

The principle of secularism was further consolidated through the removal of the clause declaring Islam as the state religion from the constitution.<sup>65</sup> The 1930s represented a critical period in the construction of the cultural foundations of nation-building, social cohesion, and national integration. In this context, institutions such as the Turkish Historical Society, the Turkish Language Association, and the Community Centers (Halkevleri) were established to support these objectives. Community Centers played an important role in shaping Türkiye's social and cultural life by promoting education, cultural activities, and civic participation across the country. Expanding beyond major cities into districts and villages, these institutions became a central component of the broader cultural transformation associated with the early republican project.<sup>66</sup> Community Centers have played a pivotal role in shaping Türkiye's social and cultural landscape.<sup>67</sup> By the late 1930s, their number had approached 4,500, reflecting the state's effort to institutionalize cultural mobilization at the grassroots level.<sup>68</sup> The activities of these centers were organized across several fields, including language, literature and history, fine arts, theatre, sports, social welfare, public lectures and courses, libraries and publications, agriculture, as well as museums and exhibitions.

Legislative reforms during this period formally established political equality between women and men. Turkish women first gained the right to vote in municipal elections in 1930 and later obtained full suffrage—including the right to stand for parliamentary office—in 1934.<sup>69</sup> By the mid-1930s, women in the Republic of Türkiye had secured legal and political rights that in several cases preceded similar reforms in many European countries.<sup>70</sup> These reforms were not only political in character but also had broader social and economic implications. By expanding women's participation in public and economic life, the reforms incorporated a previously marginalized segment of society into the country's productive structure. In this sense, gender equality formed part of the broader republican project of social transformation and institutional modernization

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<sup>65</sup> Cevdet Perin, *Atatürk Kültür Devrimi*, Yelken, İstanbul, 1982, pp. 78-79

<sup>66</sup> Mehmet Salihoglu, *Atatürkçü Düşünce: Denemeler, Eleştirmeler, İncelemeler*, Turkey Emlak Bank Publications, Ankara 1971, pp. 159-160; Görkem Akgöz, *In the Shadow of War and Empire: Europe and the Formation of Modern Turkey*, Brill, Leiden, 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Özçaylak, *ibid*, p. 154.

<sup>68</sup> Perin, *ibid*, p. 89.

<sup>69</sup> Irmak, 1981, *ibid*, p. 224; Perin, *ibid*, p. 123.

<sup>70</sup> Mehmet Arif Demirel, *Atatürk Ve Ekonomi*, Sonçağ, Ankara, 2017, p. 24.

The reforms implemented during this period extended beyond institutional changes and also encompassed a series of transformative measures at the cultural and ideological level. These included the adoption of the Latin alphabet, the separation of religion from state authority in place of the earlier theocratic framework, the establishment of gender equality in contrast to the previous marginalization of women, wide-ranging legal reforms, and a growing emphasis on public education and literacy campaigns. Taken together, these reforms aimed to reshape social consciousness while supporting broader processes of institutional and socio-economic transformation within the early republican order.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Progressive Transformation of Statism: From Moderate Pragmatism to Dynamic State Leadership**

The outbreak of the Great Depression following the 1929 collapse of the U.S. stock market marked a turning point in the global economic order and produced significant repercussions for peripheral economies such as Türkiye. Structurally linked to the world market through a narrow range of primary agricultural exports and heavily dependent on imported industrial and capital goods—including machinery, petroleum products, and processed commodities such as sugar—the Turkish economy proved highly vulnerable to external shocks. The dramatic contraction in global trade not only reduced foreign demand for Turkish exports but also revealed the fragility of the country's externally oriented economic structure. As international markets collapsed and prices of agricultural commodities declined, Türkiye experienced a notable downturn in export revenues and industrial activity, exposing the structural limitations of the early republican economic model.<sup>72</sup>

In response to the rapid depreciation of the Turkish currency during the early years of the global economic crisis, the state implemented a series of regulatory measures aimed at preserving monetary stability. Law No. 1447, enacted on May 30, 1929, placed the stock exchange under state control and restricted speculative transactions by individuals and institutions, thereby reducing financial volatility. This intervention was followed by the Law on the Protection of the Value of the Turkish Currency (Law No. 1567), adopted on February 22, 1930, which granted the government extensive authority over foreign exchange operations and capital movements. These measures reflected a clear shift toward a more protective and

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<sup>71</sup> Alev Coşkun, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi ve Demokratik Sol*, Tekin, İstanbul 1978, p.27.

<sup>72</sup> Güneri Akalın, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Ekonomi-Politik Tarihinin Ekonomi-Politik Yorumu*, Orion, Ankara 2010, pp. 117-118.

interventionist monetary framework.<sup>73</sup> These comprehensive interventions signaled the adoption of a deliberate and robust monetary strategy designed to ensure price stability and preserve national economic sovereignty. By the early 1930s, the relative stabilization and appreciation of the Turkish lira against major currencies such as the British pound indicated the effectiveness of these policies. The experience of the Great Depression thus accelerated Türkiye's transition from a relatively moderate interpretation of statism toward a more interventionist and state-directed economic strategy.<sup>74</sup>

### **Planned Industrialization as a Pillar of Kemalist Economic Doctrine**

In 1929, the government instructed the Supreme Economic Council to prepare a comprehensive economic program aimed at identifying opportunities for import substitution, addressing the persistent imbalance in the balance of payments, and supporting the development of domestic industry.<sup>75</sup> The resulting report, submitted to the Prime Ministry in March 1930 under the title *Report on Our Economic Situation*<sup>76</sup>, provided an assessment of the country's economic structure and outlined strategies to expand domestic production in sectors previously dependent on imports. Particular emphasis was placed on the development of key industrial branches such as cotton and wool textiles, paper and cardboard production, and basic metal industries including iron and steel. These proposals reflected an emerging policy orientation that prioritized industrialization and economic self-sufficiency as central components of the Republic's development strategy.<sup>77</sup>

The Industry Congress convened in the same year emphasized the urgency of accelerating Türkiye's industrialization and stimulated an ongoing search for practical policy solutions that continued until the early 1930s. During this period, policymakers increasingly recognized the central role of the state in initiating the production of essential goods that required large-scale capital investment beyond the capacity of the domestic private sector. In line with this orientation, Sümerbank was established in 1933 as a key institutional instrument of the emerging statist development strategy.<sup>78</sup> Functioning both as an industrial holding and a financial institution, Sümerbank played a leading role in the

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<sup>73</sup> Haldun Derin, *Türkiye'de Devletçilik*, Çituri Biraderler, İstanbul, 1940, pp. 151-152.

<sup>74</sup> Mustafa Aysan, *Atatürk Dönemi Ekonomi Politikaları*, Minval, İstanbul 2014, p. 151.

<sup>75</sup> Cazim Gürbüz, *Atatürk Ekonomisi ve Beş Destan Adam*, Asya Şafak, İstanbul 2009, p. 56.

<sup>76</sup> Kumkale, *ibid*, p. 271.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, p. 52.

<sup>78</sup> Demirer, *Ibid*, p. 121.

establishment and management of several state-owned industrial enterprises across the country. These developments created the institutional foundation for the implementation of the First Five-Year Industrial Plan in 1934, which marked a more systematic phase of state-led industrialization in the Turkish economy. In comparative perspective, such state-led initiatives resemble patterns observed in other late-industrializing societies where state institutions assumed a leading role in initiating industrial transformation and overcoming structural constraints in domestic capital formation.<sup>79</sup>

The First Five-Year Industrial Plan (1934–1938) was designed around a strategy that prioritized the establishment of industrial enterprises based on domestically available raw materials, projects requiring substantial capital investment and modern technological processes, and production capacities aligned with domestic consumption needs. The plan allocated investment and development efforts to five key sectors: textile manufacturing, mining, cellulose and paper production, ceramics, and the chemical industry. Through this sectoral framework, the plan aimed to strengthen the country's industrial base and reduce dependence on imported manufactured goods.<sup>80</sup> (Table 1).

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Groundbreaking Date</b>	<b>Opening Date</b>
Kayseri Cloth Factory	May 20, 1934	September 16, 1935
Bakırköy Cloth Factory	Renovated and opened.	August 13, 1934
Izmit Paper Factory	August 14, 1934	April 18, 1936
Pasabahce Glass Factory	August 14, 1934	November 29, 1935
Zonguldak Semikok Factory	August 15, 1934	-
Konya-Eregli Cloth Factory	November 20, 1934	April 4, 1937
Nazilli Textile Factory	August 23, 1935	October 9, 1937
Bursa Merino Factory	November 28, 1935	-

<sup>79</sup> David Waldner, *State Building and Late Development*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1999.

<sup>80</sup> Çavdar et al., *Ibid*, p. 43.

Gemlik Rayon Factory	November 28, 1935	February 1, 1938
Karabuk Iron and Steel Factory	April 3, 1937	-
Malatya Cloth Factory	May 25, 1937	-

*Table 1- Major Industrial Enterprises Established under the First Five-Year Industrial Plan (1934–1938)*<sup>81</sup>

Preparations for the Second Five-Year Industrial Plan began in late 1936, before the completion of the First Five-Year Industrial Plan. The new plan aimed to expand the scope of state-led industrialization by promoting the development of the machinery industry and strengthening key sectors such as energy, mining, and maritime chemicals. Unlike the First Plan, which primarily focused on consumer goods industries, the Second Plan placed greater emphasis on the production of intermediate and capital goods and was supported by complementary investments in electrification, mining, and port infrastructure. While the First Plan envisaged the establishment of around twenty industrial enterprises, the Second Plan significantly broadened this objective by targeting the construction of nearly one hundred factories.<sup>82</sup> However, the outbreak of the Second World War prevented the full implementation of these industrial objectives. Nevertheless, as Murat Metinsoy notes, the state-led development strategy of the 1930s contributed to a rapid expansion of industrial output in the Turkish economy.<sup>83</sup>

Avciođlu argued that Atatürk’s revolutionary project encountered significant obstacles in establishing a coherent path toward a fully realized national revolutionary development. In his view, a durable model of national development required the institutionalization of a strong and permanent public sector presence within the economy.<sup>84</sup> Central to this perspective was the state’s control over key strategic sectors of production, together with the coordinated use of financial and material resources through comprehensive economic planning.<sup>85</sup> Although Atatürk’s economic policies did not fully correspond to this

<sup>81</sup> Demirer, *Ibid*, p. 177; Yenal, *Ibid*, p. 94.

<sup>82</sup> Kopar, *Ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>83</sup> Murat Metinsoy, *The Power of People: Everyday Resistance and Dissent in the Making of Modern Turkey, 1923-38*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021, p. 125.

<sup>84</sup> Avciođlu, *ibid*, 1990, 1998.

<sup>85</sup> Avciođlu, *ibid*, 1998, pp. 1092, 1172-1173.

model, Avcıoğlu nevertheless acknowledged that they reflected several of its underlying principles.

Mümtaz Soysal, a leading intellectual associated with the journal *Yön*, argued that a coherent and institutionalized developmental framework did not fully emerge across all levels of the Turkish bureaucratic apparatus during the early phases of planned economic development. According to Soysal, sustained and systematic efforts to establish such a comprehensive planning mentality remained limited.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, during Atatürk's era, important steps were taken to strengthen institutions responsible for economic planning and policy coordination, reflecting an increasing recognition of the role of state institutions in guiding development.

### **Unveiling the Structural Reforms of Kemalism: A Critique of Populist Misinterpretations**

Atatürk grounded his revolutionary project in an economic framework designed to support long-term transformation. From a comparative historical perspective, revolutions are rarely limited to ideological or institutional change alone; they typically involve a broader reconfiguration of state institutions and social relations<sup>87</sup>. Accordingly, interpretations that portray Kemalist reformism as merely bureaucratic, top-down, and limited to changes in the superstructure overlook both its economic policies and its broader social objectives.<sup>88</sup> The Kemalist reforms sought to expand their social base through institutional and cultural changes that were also intended to influence economic development and social production relations. As Niyazi Berkes argues,<sup>89</sup> Kemalism represented a body of revolutionary legislation aimed at restructuring society; however, the social and cultural conditions necessary for the full realization of these reforms were not yet sufficiently developed. By way of illustration, the educational reforms implemented under Kemalism failed to foster enlightenment among the peasantry, largely due to the persistence of adverse economic conditions in rural areas. Consequently, these reforms engendered alienation and resistance rather than facilitating substantive socio-cultural transformation.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, efforts were made to address these structural constraints. Following the establishment

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<sup>86</sup> Soysal, *Ibid*, 1958.

<sup>87</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

<sup>88</sup> Kışlalı, *ibid*, p. 68.

<sup>89</sup> Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye İktisat Tarihi (100 Soruda)*. Gerçek, İstanbul 1970.

<sup>90</sup> Hasan Dinçer, Niyazi Berkes'in Yetiştirdiği Dönem ve İlk Yazıları. *Atatürk Yolu Dergisi*, 68, 2021, pp. 343-390.

of the Republic, agriculture became a central policy priority. Public expenditure allocated to agriculture increased from 2.63 percent of the budget in 1933 to 3.77 percent in 1936, reflecting the government's commitment to rural development.<sup>91</sup> Atatürk himself emphasized the importance of this sector, stating that "agriculture constitutes the foundation of the national economy," thereby highlighting its central place in the economic strategy of the early Republic.<sup>92</sup>

Avciođlu argues that the class configuration during the Atatürk period was shaped by an emerging industrial and commercial bourgeoisie integrated into the global capitalist system, acting alongside urban elites and influential landowning groups. According to this interpretation, these social groups formed a dominant alliance that consolidated their economic and political influence within the early Republican order.<sup>93</sup> Avciođlu therefore maintained that the establishment of a genuinely democratic system in Türkiye required the dismantling of the economic and political power of both the bourgeoisie and the landed elites through far-reaching structural reforms.<sup>94</sup> From this perspective, the reforms of the period were insufficient to fundamentally alter existing power relations. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the statist orientation of agricultural policy during the Atatürk era was not primarily designed to cultivate a new capitalist class. In this sense, the transformative character of the revolution must be evaluated in relation to its broader attempt to challenge entrenched economic and political hierarchies.<sup>95</sup>

Atatürk's agricultural reforms were shaped by a strategy aimed at supporting small-scale agricultural production while also establishing state-owned model farms. Within this framework, specialized agricultural research stations were founded across the country, including grain improvement centers in Ankara, Eskişehir, Erzurum, and Yeşilköy; cotton research facilities in Adana and Nazilli; and potato and maize stations in Adapazarı. A nationwide network of state nurseries was also created to cultivate and distribute key seedlings—such as mulberry, pistachio, tea, apple, apricot, olive, and fig—to rural communities. These initiatives reflected the state's effort to increase agricultural productivity through scientific methods and institutional support.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, agricultural sales cooperatives and unions were institutionalized to strengthen

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<sup>91</sup> Kopar, *ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>92</sup> Demirer, *ibid*, p.73.

<sup>93</sup> Avciođlu, *ibid*, 1990, 1998.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid*, pp. 489-490.

<sup>95</sup> Taner Timur, *Türk Devrimi ve Sonrası*, İmge, Ankara, 1994, p. 292.

<sup>96</sup> Koç, *ibid*, p. 61.

smallholder production. The establishment of Agricultural Sales Cooperatives in 1935 aimed to improve producers' market access, stabilize demand, and increase the value of agricultural products through processing. By limiting the role of intermediaries in domestic and international markets, these cooperatives sought to ensure that a larger share of the economic return reached producers while also promoting quality standardization and greater integration within the national agrarian economy.<sup>97</sup>

In 1938, the establishment of Hazelnut Agricultural Sales Cooperatives, followed by the creation of Fiskobirlik—the Hazelnut Sales Cooperatives Union—in Ordu, Bulancak, Giresun, and Trabzon, reflected Atatürk's commitment to supporting economically vulnerable producers. The cooperative movement represented an effort to prevent the domination of weaker producers by more powerful economic actors. As Atatürk stated, "Cooperation entails the unification of material and spiritual resources, intellect, and agility. It is not a mere amalgamation of the strong overpowering the weak; such an alliance would only perpetuate the subjugation of the weak by the strong".<sup>98</sup> This perspective illustrates the egalitarian principles underlying his broader socioeconomic reforms. Within this framework, statist agricultural policies combined the establishment of state-owned farms with the support of small-scale producers and cooperative structures.<sup>99</sup> In his address on November 1, 1937, Atatürk also emphasized that the persistence of landless peasants was unacceptable, highlighting the need for land redistribution to promote a more equitable agrarian structure.

Prior to the convening of the Turkish Economic Congress, Atatürk vehemently advocated for the institutionalization of labor rights, underscoring in a parliamentary address the imperative for comprehensive legislation to regulate workers' entitlements and remuneration in order to elevate their socio-economic standing. In 1921, amidst the exigencies of the War of Independence, the enactment of Laws No. 114 and 151 constituted seminal milestones in the protection of coal miners' rights within the Zonguldak Basin. These legislative instruments rigorously codified labor conditions in the Ereğli mining district, imposing upon employers the obligation to provide adequate lodging and rest facilities, limiting the working day to a maximum of eight hours, mandating double compensation for overtime labor, and instituting a tripartite wage

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<sup>97</sup> Nesrin Yıldırım, *Atatürk'ün İktisadi Egemenlik İlkesinin Kalkınma Politikaları*, Barış, Ankara, 2006, p. 225.

<sup>98</sup> Beşir Hamitoğulları, "Atatürk Devletçiliği ve Ekonomik Bağımsızlık", *Economic Policy of Atatürk Era and Turkey's Economic Development Seminar*, Ankara University Publications, pp. 123.

<sup>99</sup> Koç, *ibid*, p. 63.

determination commission comprising representatives of labor, management, and the state. Moreover, the statutes imposed a minimum employment age of eighteen, thereby embedding progressive labor standards within a nascent republic grappling with socio-political upheaval.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the enactment of the Labor Law in 1936 marked a pivotal advancement in Türkiye's socio-legal landscape, addressing one of the most pressing social challenges of the era. This comprehensive legislation codified labor relations, institutionalized workers' rights, and laid the groundwork for modern labor standards, thereby reinforcing the state's commitment to social justice and equitable economic development.<sup>101</sup> As underscored by Metinsoy, this law constituted a major milestone in the institutional regulation of labor relations in Türkiye, addressing a longstanding absence of a coherent legal framework and responding to growing public criticism regarding the lack of effective protection for workers.<sup>102</sup>

Avciođlu argues that one of the fundamental errors of the Turkish intelligentsia was the belief that constitutionalism and political liberty alone would be sufficient to secure the country's progress. In his view, many intellectuals assumed that civilizational advancement could simply be transferred and imposed upon an existing feudal socio-economic structure without transforming its underlying foundations. In contrast, Atatürk pursued reforms that combined structural and superstructural change and were adapted to the specific historical and social conditions of the country.<sup>103</sup> In *Atatürk ve Devrimcilik*, Bülent Ecevit similarly questions the extent to which certain reforms primarily addressed the superstructure, asking what practical benefits measures such as the Hat Reform brought to the peasantry. Nevertheless, reforms often described as symbolic—such as the institutionalization of secularism, the expansion of women's rights, and the reforms in script and language—also contributed to broader social and economic transformations.<sup>104</sup> Pivotal transformations—such as the institutionalization of secularism, the advancement of women's rights, and the comprehensive reforms in script and language—served as critical catalysts precipitating profound structural reconfigurations within the socio-economic fabric, exerting both immediate and long-term influences that fundamentally recalibrated the underlying modes of production and social relations.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Cazim Gürbüz, *Atatürk, Ekonomi ve Milliyetçilik*, Nergiz, İstanbul, 2017, p. 147.

<sup>101</sup> Irmak, *ibid*, p. 251.

<sup>102</sup> Metinsoy, *ibid*, p. 145.

<sup>103</sup> Avciođlu, *ibid*, 1990.

<sup>104</sup> Bülent Ecevit, *Atatürk ve Devrimcilik*, İş Bankası, İstanbul 2015, pp. 50-58.

<sup>105</sup> Salihiođlu, *ibid*, p. 29.

As Mübeccel Belik Kıray argues, the absence of secularism constitutes a major obstacle to the development of an industrial society, since functional relations between the state, the economy, and individuals depend on the institutionalization of secular principles.<sup>106</sup> From this perspective, as Emre Kongar suggests, the Kemalist revolution can be interpreted as a process in which superstructural reforms played a significant role in facilitating deeper structural transformations within society.<sup>107</sup>

Atatürk did not adopt the orthodox Marxist interpretation that treats the economic base as the sole determinant of the superstructure. In classical Marxist theory, revolutionary change is generally understood as originating in transformations of the economic base, which subsequently lead to changes in legal, political, and cultural institutions.<sup>108</sup> Within this framework, a transformation can be considered revolutionary only if the structures that constitute the superstructure—such as law, politics, institutions, and cultural norms—are reshaped as a consequence of changes in the underlying economic system. From a Weberian perspective, however, the relationship between structure and superstructure is more reciprocal, as each sphere influences and reshapes the other.<sup>109</sup> In this sense, Atatürk's reforms in areas such as religion, culture, and social norms can be interpreted as measures that sought to influence broader structural change by transforming the institutional and cultural framework of society.

Bahri Savcı,<sup>110</sup> a political scientist known for his Marxist-influenced analyses during the 1960s, interpreted Atatürk's revolutions primarily as superstructural reforms, as discussed in the opening chapter. While he acknowledged Atatürk as an important figure in the process of social and economic modernization, Savcı argued that the structural and intellectual foundations necessary to sustain this transformation did not fully emerge. In his view, this deficiency contributed to a range of structural challenges, including demographic pressures, declining agricultural productivity, stagnation in key sectors, a weak domestic industrial base, rising unemployment, educational deficiencies, and persistent poverty. Nevertheless, such interpretations do not fully capture the historical trajectory of the period. Empirical evidence suggests that Türkiye achieved notable progress

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<sup>106</sup> Mübeccel Belik Kıray, *Hayatımda Hiç Arkama Bakmadım*, Bağlam, İstanbul, 2002, p. 282.

<sup>107</sup> Kongar, *ibid*, p. 130.

<sup>108</sup> Marx, *ibid*, 1978, p. 26.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas Burton Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, *Marx'ın Sosyolojisi*, Translator Zuhâl Bilgin, Çiviyazıları, İstanbul, 2006, p. 183.

<sup>110</sup> Savcı, *Ibid*, 1963, 1981, pp. 9-12.

in several of these areas within a relatively short period, indicating a more complex and multidimensional process of modernization.

	<b>1923</b>	<b>1940</b>
Coal Production	600,000 tons	3,000,000 tons
Cement Production	-	270,000 tons
Glass Production	-	6,000 tons
Iron and Steel Production	-	130,000 tons
Electricity Generation	50 milyon kwh	400 milyon kWh
Rail Length	3.756 km	7.500 km
Highway Length	2.500 km	21.000 km
Number of Phones	2.000	23.000
Sugar Production	-	90,000 tons
Wheat Production	1,075 tons (the year 1925) 86 kg. (Production per capita). (the year 1925).	4,279 tons (the year 1925). 252 kg. (Production per capita). (the year 1925).
Number of Cattle	4 million	10 million
Literacy Rate	5%	25%
Number of Primary Schools	4.894	6.181

Number of Primary School Students	342 thousand (2.7% of the population).	750 thousand (4.4% of the population).
Number of Secondary Schools	72	220
Number of Secondary School Students	5.905	71.021
Number of High Schools	80	160
Number of High School Students	1.241	18.277
Number of Universities	9	20
Number of Medical Doctors	400	1.600
Export	85 million	127 million
Gross Domestic Product	633 million	2.054 million

Table 2- Selected Indicators of Economic and Social Transformation in Türkiye<sup>111</sup>

Atatürk's address at the İzmir Economic Congress played an important role in defining the economic vision of the early Republic and outlining the principles of national development. The program articulated during the Congress emphasized economic independence, industrialization, and the reconstruction of an economy that had been severely weakened during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire. Within a relatively short period, the Republic initiated a series

<sup>111</sup> Demirel, *Ibid*, p. 108; Derin, *Ibid*, p. 111; Suay Karaman, S. "Kemalist Kalkınma", in *Cumhuriyet'in Ekonomi Politikası*, Tarihçi, İstanbul, 2019, pp.77; Nahit Töre, "Atatürk Dönemi'nin (1923-1938) Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Politikası", *Economic Policy of Atatürk Era and Turkey's Economic Development Seminar*, Ankara University Publications, Ankara 1982, p. 61.

of institutional and economic reforms aimed at stabilizing the national economy and promoting modernization. International observers also recognized this transformation; in 1938, an editorial in *The Times* referred to the emergence of a “New Türkiye.” This assessment reflects not only Atatürk’s role as a political leader but also his broader contribution to shaping the institutional and economic foundations of the Republic.<sup>112</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the common interpretation that reduces Atatürk’s revolutionary program to a set of primarily cultural and institutional reforms detached from the material foundations of socio-economic transformation. By situating the Kemalist revolution within its historical and institutional context, the analysis has sought to challenge this reductionist perspective and to reconsider the broader developmental logic underlying the reforms of the early Republican period.

Drawing on legislative developments, economic policies, institutional reforms, and contemporary intellectual debates, the study has shown that the reforms associated with Atatürk formed part of a broader and more coherent project of national reconstruction. Economic transformation, political consolidation, and cultural change were not separate processes but closely interconnected elements of a wider effort to rebuild the institutional and economic foundations of the new state.

Several key developments illustrate this integrated transformation. The abolition of the Ařar tax, the establishment of national financial institutions such as Türkiye İř Bankası, the legal framework introduced by the 1927 Encouragement of Industry Law, and the implementation of state-led development planning through the First and Second Five-Year Industrial Plans all point to a systematic attempt to restructure the economy and reduce the external vulnerabilities inherited from the late Ottoman period.

Reforms often described as *superstructural*—including secularization, language reform, and the reorganization of education—also played an important role in this process. Rather than being merely symbolic measures, these policies helped reshape the institutional and cultural environment within which economic transformation could take place. In this sense, cultural and institutional reforms formed an integral part of the broader modernization strategy of the early Republic.

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<sup>112</sup> Demirer, *Ibid*, p. 17.

The study has also reconsidered the argument that the absence of comprehensive land reform represents a fundamental structural limitation of the Kemalist project. While it is true that a radical agrarian redistribution did not occur, this outcome must be understood in relation to the political and institutional constraints of the period, including the challenges of state consolidation and limited administrative capacity. At the same time, agricultural policies, cooperative initiatives, and efforts to strengthen rural production indicate that the state did pursue certain forms of structural change in the countryside.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Kemalist revolution cannot be adequately understood through a rigid separation between structure and superstructure. The transformation of early Republican Türkiye emerged through the interaction of economic policy, institutional reform, and cultural change. Recognizing this interaction allows for a more balanced understanding of both the achievements and the limitations of the early Republican transformation.

Ultimately, Atatürk's reforms should be understood not as isolated or purely symbolic initiatives but as part of a broader effort to reconstruct the institutional, economic, and social foundations of the new Turkish state. Reconsidering the Kemalist revolution in this way not only provides a more nuanced interpretation of early Republican development but also contributes to wider debates on state-led modernization and post-imperial transformation.

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