Part-Time Wealth: Smuggling, War, and Class-Formation in Turkey’s Kurdistan
Firat Bozcali
Stanford University

Various kinds of smuggling have historically existed across Kurds living in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Yet, there has been a dramatic increase in the scale of smuggling amidst the civil war between the Turkish military and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party). The war has brought about the militarization of the region, the establishment of military bases, military checkpoints, and security zones, as well as village evacuations and the forced displacement. These conditions have devastated the local economies of agriculture and ranching, and compelled many people to engage in smuggling. In addition to the full-time smugglers, various people have also engaged in smuggling occasionally. Thus, smuggling campaigns have often brought together people with different class and profession backgrounds.

This paper explores how smuggling economies entrenched in civil war conditions have shaped class-formation and class subjectivities in Turkey’s Kurdistan. Through ethnographical accounts of two ‘part-time’ smugglers, a border villager and a city-based construction contractor, I describe and discuss the new modalities and temporalities of wealth accumulation and debt relations as well as the new regimes of inequalities that the smuggling economies created. The paper is based on 20-months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the city center of Van and four border towns, Çaldıran, Özalp, Saray, and Başkale.

The existing literature on the Kurds and Kurdistan has often focused on the political and armed conflict, focusing on political actors on each side, examining contesting political demands, and documenting the rights violations committed by both sides, but paid little attention on everyday political and socio-economic encounters, tensions, and mediations within the Kurdish society. This paper aims to counterbalance this lack of attention by examining ‘part-time’ smugglers and the political and economic subjectivities that part-time smuggling networks have created.