

Colonialism, self-determination and independence: The new PKK paradigm

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Introduction

In its 1978 manifesto, the PKK, like other national liberation movements at the time, declared the establishment of an independent state to be the only correct political goal. However, following a critique (and self-critique) on the character of national liberation struggles and socialism as it actually was, or 'real existing socialism', the PKK started to question whether independence should be conceptualized and practised as a state/nation-state construction. This resulted in a redefinition of the PKK's political strategy. Though adhering to the idea of self-determination, the PKK does not now tie itself to the establishment of a state, but rather to developing people's capacities to govern themselves. The PKK disconnected the idea of self-determination from the idea of state establishment and reconnected it to that of self-government. In this chapter, I will discuss this new paradigm of the PKK and the redefinition of self-determination. I will try to explain the PKK as it understands itself, how it makes sense of itself and the world. First, I will briefly introduce the PKK, before turning to the debate about the colonial status of Kurdistan and the idea of self-determination. This is followed by a discussion of the PKK's paradigm shift and what this means for the idea of self-determination.

The PKK

The Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, is probably the most important secular insurgent political movement in the Middle East area. Unlike most Kurdish political parties, which adopted a rather conservative outlook and were organized around tribal leaders and structures, the PKK originated from the left. Not only did its cadre have a background within the revolutionary left that emerged in the 1960s and was beheaded after the 1971 military coup, but also it was crucially informed by the discourse of the revolutionary left. The militants considered themselves Marxists engaged in making a revolution with Kurdistan as their focal area. Linkages with traditional or nationalist Kurdish parties hardly existed.

In the period during which the PKK was formed (1973-78), its political outlook was shaped around two main objectives: 1) the transformation of Kurdish society through the elimination of relations of exploitation, and 2) the unification of Kurdistan and the establishment of an independent state. At the time, the economy of northern Kurdistan (southeast Turkey) was based on agriculture; pockets of industry could be found in Batman (oil) and Antep (food, textiles, and furniture), but farming

dominated. Relations of exploitation were mainly defined by divisions of labour and hierarchy based on the distinctions between agricultural labourer, tenant farmer and landowner. The large landowners, who were sometimes also tribal and religious leaders, not seldom maintained close relations with the state and tended to regard peasants and villagers as their subjects. The PKK thought that a termination of relations of exploitation depended on ending the divisions of labour and hierarchy by means of land reform and redistribution. In the party's programme, *The Road of the Revolution in Kurdistan*, such a societal transformation was considered to be dependent on a process of state-formation, the establishment of an 'independent, united and democratic Kurdistan' (PKK 1978a: 127). The social revolution would follow a national liberation; through realisation of a state power, the social agenda (land reform, the construction of socialism) could be implemented.

Colonialism

The status of Kurdistan and the Kurds became one of the main issues of debate within the left in the 1970s, yet most political parties on the left did not analyse the relationship between Kurdistan and Turkey in terms of colonialism. One of the banners the revolutionary left had been marching behind in the 1970s was that of a 'Fully Independent Turkey!' Those same radical voices that regarded Turkey as in a vassal-like colonial relationship to Western capitalist imperialism fell silent in the face of Turkey's own role as itself a colonising country, vis-à-vis Kurdistan and the Kurds. "The Turkish left did not accept the colonial status of Kurdistan," a former activist in the left in Turkey recalls. "The only exceptions were Kurtuluş, the movement that emerged from the THKP-C, and TKP(B), a current inspired by Dr. Hikmet Kıvılcımlı"¹ (Suat Bozkuş, personal communication, April 18, 2015). The rejection of the colonization thesis by the left in Turkey is discussed here through publications on the Kurdish issue by Dev-Yol, one of the most influential organisations in revolutionary politics in the 1970s (see for an extensive discussion, (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012).

Named after a journal first published in May 1977, Dev-Yol published a series of four articles on the Kurdish question (Dev-Yol 1977a, b, 1978a, b). In these articles, the organisation analysed the relationship between the Turkish and Kurdish nation in terms of oppressor and oppressed, but claiming that the status of colony could not be asserted on the basis of the

¹ For an analysis of Kurdistan as a colony of Turkey, see Hikmet Kıvılcımlı. 1978. *Yedek Güç: Milliyet (Dogu)*. Ankara: Yol Yayınları

dependent country as this had to be done according to the status of the oppressor country. Colonialism, Dev-Yol argued, is a phenomenon that occurred in the historical stage of imperialism, and Turkey could not be an imperialist country since it itself had the status of (semi)-colony. It was argued that:

Marxist theory of colonialism shows that in the age of imperialism a dependent country which is not capitalist by its internal dynamic but has a kind of distorted capitalism (such as Turkey) historically cannot establish a colonialist relationship. Nowadays the debate on colonialism makes only sense within the framework of discussion of imperialism. (Dev-Yol 1978a)

Colonialism, Dev-Yol argued, is a relationship between a capitalist country and a dependent country. Since Turkey was not a capitalist country, its relation with Kurdistan could not be one of coloniser and colony. It was also argued within the left that a colony has a different governance structure than that of the colonizing country, and since Kurdistan was politically integrated into Turkey, it could not be a colony.

Importantly, the debate on the nature of the relationship between Turkey and Kurdistan was linked to political strategies. The left that did not regard Kurdistan as a colony argued that the political struggle could not be characterised in terms of an anti-colonial struggle or identity, and had to be defined in terms of class-struggle (Dev-Yol 1977b). Within the borders of this state, all suppressed classes were supposed to struggle, without differentiating between nations, against the ruling class, which has control over the state (Dev-Yol 1977a). Dev-Yol's, position, or for that matter most of the left, was that there was only one revolutionary subject: the working class. Their 'proletarian messianism' held that the workers of Turkey would bring liberation to the exploited and oppressed Kurds too, while a demand for Kurdish rights would only weaken the struggle of the working class and therefore undermine their own liberation. Kurdish workers and peasants had to organize themselves on the basis of their class identity.

The PKK, however, argued that the relationship between Turkey and Kurdistan was a colonial one, marked by military occupation, assimilative politics and economic exploitation (PKK 1978b: 20-22). Although Turkey was in a dependent position to the United States, Turkey was attributed agency too. Turkey was considered an actor in a chain of domination and exploitation. Therefore, the relationship between Turkey and Kurdistan could be analysed as a colonial one. Importantly, this

analysis implied that the PKK in the 1970s somehow adhered to the idea of a plurality of the social, and thus of social subjects or revolutionary actors, on the basis of both class and national identity. This idea of a social plurality was later enriched with a gender analysis and expanded to include women as revolutionary subjects.

For the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, the name used by the militants who established the PKK in 1978, bonds of brotherhood between Kurds and Turks through class were not assumed. In their view, a bond could only be the product of struggle. The issue was not one of choosing between anti-colonial and social struggle but of articulating anti-colonial and social struggle, and through this articulation creating a bond between the different actors in these struggles (see also Jongerden and Akkaya 2012). The insistence on class unity by most of the revolutionary left in Turkey implied in practise a blatant denial of the humiliation and dehumanization that Kurds in Turkey lived through. Since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Kurds had faced forced assimilation and concerted efforts to destroy their cultural identity, and the revolutionary left in Turkey chose not to politicize this. What the left failed to understand, however, was that when facing a situation of de-humanization, the foundational question becomes that of 'how to recover a sense of humanity on the basis of the dehumanising practices of colonial domination.' (Harvey 2014: 272). Referring to Fanon, Harvey argues that "(r)evolution ... was not simply about the transfer of power from one segment of society to another. It entailed the reconstruction of humanity ... a distinctive post-colonial humanity (ibid)."

Self-determination

The process of decolonisation was linked to the debate about the right to self-determination, the right of people to decide their own destiny. Among and within self-declared revolutionary movements, the right to self-determination has mostly been conceptualized in terms of the right to separate (secede) and of independent state formation. In this regard, the PKK was 'strongly influenced by the real existing² socialist system that had molded global revolutionary movements and national liberation struggles' (Uzun 2014: 21).

The quest for independence was based on a Marxist-Leninist approach to the issue of self-determination, indeed, as specifically argued by Lenin (1914): "We must inevitably reach the conclusion that the self-determination of nations means the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies, and the formation of an independent national state."³

²A caption that "implied that the economic, political, and social makeup of the Soviet bloc societies was in fact a distinct mode of production, with its own immanent tendencies, which could not be grasped either by reference to the concepts of Western social science or by the instruments of official communist ideology" (The Dictionary of Sociology: http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/real_socialism.aspx#). The term was also used to refer to the models in Albania, China, Cuba, Yugoslavia and other self-declared socialist countries.

³Lenin's advocacy of national self-determination was controversial in Marxist circles at the time, and even amongst fellow Bolsheviks (see Thomas Jeffrey Miley, forthcoming: "Self-Determination for Catalonia? Secessionist Politics as a Dilemma for Democratic Theory."). 'In 1915, Bukharin, Piatokov, and Bosh sent documents to the Central Committee attacking Lenin's slogan of "self-determination" as "first of all utopian ... and harmful as a slogan which disseminates illusions' (Stephen F. Cohen, 1980: Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Rosa Luxemburg (1909) took a position against Lenin, arguing that "What is especially striking about this formula is the fact that it doesn't represent anything specifically connected with socialism nor with the politics of the working class'. Luxemburg, Bukharin, Radek and others thought that imperialism and the world economy had broken through national boundaries and the nation, rendering nationalism anachronistic. Others again, such as the Austro-Marxists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, took a different position. They sought to preserve the multi-national state (like the Austro-Hungarian) and developed the idea of a non-territorial cultural autonomy within such states (R. J. Johnston, David Knight and Eleonore Kofman, 2015. Nationalism, Self-Determination and Political Geography London: Routledge.).

Yet character of the anti-colonial struggle in Kurdistan was looked upon as a complex one. It did not only include separation from Turkey and the establishment of a state. The status of Kurdistan was analyzed in terms of an international colony. Together with the liberation of the various parts of Kurdistan from colonial domination by Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, a process of unification was supposed to take place.

In the 2000s, however, the PKK developed a new understanding of the right to self-determination, following on a critique of the state and nation-state form. Based on a reconsideration of liberation struggles and post-liberation struggle realities, the paradigm shift followed a self-critique on the part of the PKK and questioning of the parameters of their struggle. In the process of group formation in the 1970s, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries had oriented themselves towards the struggle of workers and oppressed elsewhere in the world. Thus, the PKK too had oriented itself on the basis of revolutionary struggles elsewhere, which they considered as being part of a common heritage of the oppressed, from the October Revolution in Russia to the revolution in China, the resistance in Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Eritrea and other countries and regions around the world. Overtime, however, the PKK came to realize that these liberation movements had not brought what they had promised, and then, at the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union, the self-declared socialist alternative, collapsed. Even though the PKK had not taken the Soviet Union as its compass, nor declared allegiance to revolutionary movements elsewhere, the failure of these movements to redeem a promise of liberation brought the PKK to a position in which it started to question the parameters of its struggle.

[The PKK] examined all the national liberation struggles. They liberated, waged big battles, millions were martyred, and eventually they won, but the gains were minimal. They reached their targets but could not realise their principles.... Adding to that the collapse of socialism, they positioned themselves as alternative. The Soviets had believed that they would only come to an end when the world would come to an end and this affected their mentality. We started a re-examination. When we were established, we took our inspiration more from struggles elsewhere than from the resistance movements in recent Kurdish history, which had all ended into a defeat, thus affecting PKK thinking. I mean, we took them [the national liberation movements] as an example, we were affected by these movements when we started our struggle, but these struggles did not bring what they should have brought. In fact, they went backwards and accepted what they had previously refused. You see, there had to be something wrong here. This demanded a re-examination. The emergence of a new paradigm [within the PKK] is very much influenced by this. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, November 28, 2014).

This questioning of the parameters of their struggle resulted in a critique of the idea of the nation-state. Importantly, as part of the critique, the historical character of the nation-state was brought to the foreground. The following passage reveals how PKK

leader Abdullah Öcalan localised the idea of self-determination as nation-state building in the context of a power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union:

The principal problem in the formation of the PKK is its ambiguity regarding the nation-statist ideology. In this respect, J. Stalin's thesis on the national question has been of particular influence. Stalin approached the national problem as that of establishing a state. This approach affected all socialist systems and national liberation movements. Lenin also accepted this right of nations to self-determination and its reduction to state formation, and this is the main cause for the ideological ambiguity of communist and socialist parties. The basic idea for the solution of the Kurdish issue when the PKK was established was the model of state formation developed by Stalin and approved by Lenin. Most of the liberation movements that peaked in that period (1950-1970) aimed at the establishment of a state and considered this the only model. A separate state became the sacred principle of the socialist credo. To be a socialist and to give support for the establishment of a state by oppressed and colonized nations were considered one and the same. If you thought differently, you were not a socialist. In fact, the principle of the right to self-determination was put forward by the American President Wilson after the First World War and became related to the developing US hegemony. Lenin, who did not want to stay in the shadow of Wilson and wanted to gain the support of the colonial nations for the Soviet Union, further radicalized the principle and reduced it to the establishment of an independent state. A competition between the two systems thus began. The most obvious example was the support both tried to give to the national resistance initiated in Anatolia. (Öcalan 2012: 271-2)

Öcalan thus treats the relationship between self-determination and nation-state formation not as somehow 'natural' but as historically contingent, emerging, in fact, in the context of competition between the superpowers. Moreover, he not only considers the nation-state as a particular historical construction but also as a problematic one, which he discusses on several occasions. The nation-state, he argues, is a centre of assimilation and homogenisation and puts people and borders under surveillance (Öcalan 2010: 195). Based on the idea of a necessary organisation of territorial human collectivities and the desire to bring congruence between territory and culture, the development of nation-states goes hand in hand with assimilation, expulsion and murder dubbed 'ethnic cleansing' and 'genocide' (Jongerden 2007).

The PKK's New Understanding of Self-determination

The PKK's new understanding of self-determination revolves around the ideas of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. The concept of democratic autonomy has to be distinguished from autonomy, referring to a form of

sub-sovereignty granted to institutions within a sovereign state, and includes the transfer of (limited) state functions and responsibilities to institutions which form a sub-state (Reyes and Kaufman 2011). The PKK carefully distinguishes democratic autonomy from autonomy. "Most people confuse democratic autonomy with autonomy" confirms senior PKK member Cemil Bayik but "in fact, there is no relation between the two" (personal communication, October 30, 2014).

Democratic autonomy, it is argued, refers to a re-grounding of the political status of people, on the basis of self-government rather than peoples' relations with the state (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014). It refers to practices in which people produce and reproduce the necessary and desired conditions for living through direct engagement and collaboration with one another. This is referred to as 'self-valorization' in autonomist Marxist literature and "provides a useful concept to draw our attention to struggles that go beyond resistance to various kinds of positive, socially constitutive self-activity" (Cleaver 1993).⁴ Democratic confederalism, meanwhile, aims at the strengthening of local administrative capacities organized in the form of councils at the levels of village (köy), urban neighborhood (mahalle), district (ilçe), city (kent), and the region (bölge), which is referred to as 'Northern Kurdistan' (Jongerden and Akkaya 2013).

The imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan initiated debate on democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism among the Kurds, inspired by the work of Murray Bookchin (Biehl 2012: 10; Öcalan 2008). Bookchin differentiates between two ideas of politics, the Hellenic model and the Roman, as having given rise to two different imaginaries of politics and understandings of government. The first, the Hellenic model, stands for a participatory-communal form of politics, with which Bookchin aligns himself, while the second, the Roman model, stands for a centralist and statist form, which he rejects (White 2008: 159). The statist, centralized Roman model has a herd of subjects (Kropotkin 1897), while the Hellenic model has an active citizenship (Bookchin 1991: 11). Unfortunately, Bookchin argues, it is the Roman model that has become the dominant form in modern society, informing the American and French constitutionalists of the 18th century. The Athens model exists as a counter- and underground current, however, finding expression in the Paris Commune of 1871, the initial councils (soviets) that emerged in the springtime of the revolution in Russia in 1917, and in the Spanish Revolution between 1936 and 1939.

Democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy occupy a rich tradition of thinking about and implementing politics, therefore, even if it is a historically marginalised one. Darrow Schecter (Schecter 1994: 74-102) has discussed the council current within the communist movement, referring to Rosa

Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci and, in particular, Anton Pannekoek. Hardt and Negri (Hardt and Negri 2004), and before them, also, Hannah Arendt, have related the council movement to currents in the American Revolution, and especially Jefferson and the idea of "the citizen's right of access to the public realm" (Arendt 1990 [1963]: 127).

According to Arendt (ibid: 249), the councils are the lost treasure of revolution, representing "an entirely new form of government, with a new public space for freedom, which was constituted and organized during the course of the revolution itself." Previously established in revolutions in America, France and Russia, today they are revived under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Communities Union (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), coordinated in the Kurdistan region of Turkey by the Democratic Society Congress (Kongreya Civaka Demokratîk, KCD) and in Syria by the Democratic Society Movement (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, Tev-Dem).

In the PKK's discourse of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism, it is not the state instituted in the functions of central government that holds power, but the people, organised as autonomous communities or groups:

The people are to be directly involved in the decision-finding process of the society. This project relies on the self-government of local communities and is organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. Citizens are the agents of this kind of self-government instead of state-based institutions. The principle of federative self-government has no limitations. It can even be continued across borders in order to create multinational democratic structures. Democratic confederalism prefers flat hierarchies where decision-finding and decision-making processes take place within local communities.... It provides a framework within which minorities, religious communities, cultural groups, gender-specific groups and other societal groups, can organize themselves autonomously (Öcalan 2014).

Thus, in this discourse, sovereignty is returned to the people, in accordance with the radical understandings of democracy of the radical thinkers in the eighteenth century, who saw sovereignty as a power that belongs to the people with no power above it and democracy as the rule of everyone by everyone (Hardt and Negri 2004: 240).⁵

⁴ The concept of self-valorization was developed in Toni Negri's (1991) reading of Marx beyond Marx. In his 'Lessons on the Grundrisse,' Negri presents an alternative reading of Marx, one that grants primacy not to capital, but to labour. This inversion of perspective, characteristic of the autonomous Marxist approach, brought the ideas of practices of autonomy and working class self-activity to the center of political debates and analyses (see Tronti 1979: 1-6; 1980: 28-35).

⁵ Hardt and Negri (2004: 245-51), but also Arendt (1990 [1963]: 215-81) argue that with the invention of representative democracy, people have been separated from power, and that council democracy and the destruction of the separation of people from power may be considered as a step towards greater democracy. Hardt and Negri (2004: 243) add to that the idea of a constitution as an effective guarantee against the oppression of the majority in a republic. In the system of democratic autonomy, this risk of oppression is dealt with both by a constitution (such as the social contract of the cantons in Rojava [West or Syrian Kurdistan]) and the granting of rights to various groups and communities to organise some (e.g. cultural) or all of their affairs autonomously.

Conclusion

I have argued that the status of Kurdistan was the subject of one of the main debates within the revolutionary left in Turkey in the 1970s and that the PKK analyzed the status of Kurdistan as being that of an international colony. In addition, I have linked the discussion about the status of a colony to the right to self-determination. The original (Leninist) interpretation of self-determination was the formation of a national state, and the initial objective of the PKK was the establishment of a united Kurdistan. However, partially as a critique of national liberation struggles, partially as a critique on the (then) existing socialism and informed by a self-critique, the PKK started to question the extent to which state formation and the nation-state form can contribute to political liberation.

I have argued that the PKK now takes the position that state sovereign power—the reality of the democratic republic that emerged—can only exist where there is a subaltern. The Roman model of government simultaneously creates a centralist state and a herd of subjects, and the concept of the nation-state adds to that an exclusionary politics of identity, assimilation and cleansing. A liberation struggle based on the establishment of a state/nation-state, therefore, cannot realize its emancipatory objectives. The paradigm shift that has been developed in response comprises a move away from what I have referred to as the Roman model and toward the Hellenic with the development of self-governing capacities. In this interpretation, self-determination comes together with empowerment, with active citizenship. The right to self-determination is not translated in the establishment of a Kurdish nation-state, but linked to the establishment of a bottom-up or grassroots democracy and a related active citizenship. This, I think, underlies the projects of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism.

Finally, the project of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism and the principle of self-government do not take borders as their point of reference, but this does not mean that these are taken for granted. According to Öcalan (2014), “it is

possible to build confederate structures across all parts of Kurdistan without the need to question the existing borders.” This means that the project of democratic confederalism does not take the drawing of new borders as its objective. However, neither does it mean that it accepts the existing borders as a fact of life. “It is not realistic to demand the immediate abolition of the state”, Öcalan continues. “However, I do not mean to say that we have to take things as they are”. The building of structures across all parts of Kurdistan and the Middle East does not question the borders, but together with the development of confederal structures, these borders lose their meaning and even may cease to exist for most practical purposes. This is what Mustafa Karasu, member of the executive council of the KCK, calls rendering borders irrelevant, without taking them as the focus of the struggle:

In bourgeois thinking, the right to self-determination is formulated in terms of establishing a state. But this is not the socialist understanding of self-determination. We think democratic confederalism is the best possible way of practicing self-determination.... Since democratic confederalism does not take the state as its main frame, it is also not about changing borders. On the contrary, it is a way of thinking and doing which is non-statist. The frame of reference in democratic confederalism is developing a system of people's democracy on the basis of self-organization. As such, people develop their own institutions, councils. If people organize themselves from the bottom-up and establish relations with each other, with other councils, democratic confederalism renders borders as insignificant (Karasu 2009: 217-9).

As difficult as it may be to think and certainly go beyond the naturalized state forms of our contemporary society, this does open up a debate about other political practices and offers the promise of a different future.

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Peace in Kurdistan is involved in a collaborative project in which, together, we are trying to envisage what self-determination can and must mean in the 21st century. We are interested in making connections between struggles for self-determination around the globe. We take our inspiration from Abdullah Öcalan's re-articulation of self-determination. Öcalan has emphasised that "the propagation of grass roots democracy is elementary." We encourage people to send relevant original articles for inclusion in this new series.

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