A Commune in Rojava?

written by Alex de Jong | January 31, 2016

The siege of Kobani by Islamic State (ISIS) brought worldwide attention to the Syrian Kurdish PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party), the leading force in the Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria. The PYD calls this region Rojava—literally meaning "land of the sunset" but also translated as "West Kurdistan."

The discourse of the PYD, revolving around terms like democracy and equality and stressing women's rights, exercises a strong attraction on the worldwide left. Likewise, the struggle of the YPG/YPJ fighters (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, People's Protection Units/Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê, Women's Protection Units), organized by the PYD against ISIS, receives widespread sympathy.

Different initiatives to support the "Rojava revolution" have sprung up worldwide. A German campaign unapologetically named Waffen für Rojava (Weapons for Rojava) raised over US $135,000; other initiatives focus on humanitarian aid and political support.

In Rojava, the PYD says it is realizing a democratic society with equal rights for women, in which different ethnic and religious groups live together; political power is supposed to be organized through structures of autonomous councils. The PYD maintains that in Rojava a unique revolution is taking place, inspired by the thought of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK). Even after his arrest in 1999, Öcalan remained the political leader and the movement's "philosopher." To begin to understand the experiment in Rojava, and the attitude of the left towards it, one must consider Öcalan's ideology and compare its claims with developments on the ground.[1]

Roots of the PKK

Öcalan was born in 1949 as a son of a Kurdish peasant family. The Kurdish provinces of Turkey were always the poorest parts of the country, partly because of racist state policies that discriminated against Kurds. Speaking Kurdish was a crime, and use of the letters x, q, and w—which exist in the Kurdish alphabet but not in the Turkish—could be prosecuted; even publications that mentioned the word "Kurd" were banned. The state tried to assimilate the Kurdish minority into the Turkish majority.

Öcalan laid the groundwork for the PKK when, in the early seventies, he built the "Kurdish Revolutionaries" (Soresgeren Kurdistan, SK). This group adopted the notion of Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi that "Kurdistan" was an international colony, occupied by Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. When in 1977 the group was reorganized as the PKK, it had won modest support among Kurdish workers who had moved from the countryside to the cities to earn a living. The SK was a product of the New Left in Turkey but had some important distinctions. In contrast to other Kurdish groups, the PKK was "the only organization whose members were drawn almost exclusively from the lowest social classes—the uprooted, half-educated village and small-town youth who knew what it

felt like to be oppressed, and who wanted action, not ideological sophistication."[2] The PKK was also exceptional in making armed struggle an urgent task.

Strands of Maoism and Third-Worldism were strong among the Turkish left at the time, and the early statements of the PKK clearly show such influences. They declared that the immediate goal was a "national-democratic" revolution for an "independent and democratic Kurdistan." The struggle would take the form of a peasant-based "people's war" led by a PKK claiming to be the representative of the working class. Allies of the revolution were "socialist countries"—although the ruling parties of the Soviet Union and China were criticized as "revisionist"—as well as "working class parties of capitalist countries" and "the liberation movements of oppressed peoples of the world." After the "national-democratic" revolution, the struggle would proceed to a socialist revolution.[3]

When in 1980 the army staged a coup, the PKK had become the strongest Kurdish party in Turkey. After the coup, the Turkish left was repressed, as tens of thousands were arrested, tortured, and killed. Öcalan escaped the repression because shortly before the coup he had gone to Lebanon and from there to Syria. The regime of Hafez al-Assad allowed him to set up a base of operations in Syria, and the PKK launched its guerilla war against the Turkish state, fighting which reached a peak in the mid-nineties.

An element that set the PKK apart from similar organizations was that it was a "guerrilla-party."[4] In the PKK, being a guerrilla fighter and a party member overlapped; even cadres who did not have military responsibilities were expected to be prepared to join the guerrillas at any time. According to PKK leader Duran Kalkan, "this was not only of military value, but more important was its ideological and moral meaning." Referring to the party's 1986 congress, Kalkan stated,

Such a guerrilla makes ideologically a complete break with the ruling order; he breaks in a certain degree with the hierarchical system of the state and of power. That is why at the third Congress there was a serious ideological renewal in the conception of really existing socialism; the really existing socialist line of individual and familial, petit-bourgeois equal rights and freedom was superseded. Such a measure has consequences inside society as well where it calls forth changes that bring closer freedom and equality. It destroys individual family life.

Revolutionizing Personalities

Kalkan touched upon what became a distinctive element of the ideology of the PKK and Öcalan: the ambition to create a "new man," characterized by a certain type of personality or mentality. According to Öcalan there is a metaphysical "Kurdish mentality," a certain "composition of the Kurdish psyche." Öcalan claims, "Many of the qualities and characteristics attributed to the Kurds and their society today can already be seen in the Neolithic communities of the cis-Caucasus mountain ranges—the area we call Kurdistan."[5] However, the Kurds have been alienated from their "true" identity by the attempts of the Turkish state to assimilate the Kurds and by traditional social structures, which Öcalan calls "feudalism."

Through criticism and self-criticism and hard work, PKK members were expected to free themselves of views and attitudes that they had learned in their "old life" and remold themselves into "new men." The party journal *Serxwebûn* wrote,

The new man does not drink, does not gamble, never thinks of his own personal pleasure or comfort, and there is nothing feminine about him; those who [in the past] indulged in such activities will, sharp as a knife, cut out all these habits as soon as he or she is among new men. The new man's philosophy and morality, the way he sits and stands, his style, ego, attitude and reactions [tepki] are

his and his alone. The basis of all these things is his love for the revolution, freedom, country, and socialism, a love that is as solid as a rock. Applying scientific socialism to the reality of our country creates the new man.[6]

Already in 1993, Öcalan claimed that the PKK, when it discussed "scientific socialism," did not refer to Marxism, but to its own peculiar ideology that "exceeds the interests of states, the nation and classes."[7] As remolding people's mentality became central to the PKK's conception of socialism, Marxist notions of classes and revolution were replaced by terms like "humanization," "socialization," and "liberated personality."

Closely associated with its goal of remolding people is the PKK's view of women's liberation. The PKK's distinctive practice of women's liberation was developed in the second half of the nineties, when the participation of women in the Kurdish movement, both as politicians and as fighters, increased.[8] The PKK's ideas on women's liberation are heavily influenced by the myth of a prehistoric matriarchal past, when "woman was a creating goddess."[9] With the rise of class society, the oppression of women began. These notions are clearly copied from Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

However, an important difference between the PKK's theory of women's oppression and that of Engels is the PKK's neglect of socio-economic factors. Engels argued that with the rise of social classes came a division of labor that relegated women's labor, and hence their social status, to a secondary position. Öcalan instead puts the stress overwhelmingly on issues like "mentality" (a key word in his ideology) and "personality"; women's oppression is said to be produced by attitudes that are transferred by the family from generation to generation and which are internalized by women. Such patriarchal attitudes oppress women by blocking them from social life and by men's control of women's bodies, behaviors, and sexualities; this explanation thus neglects the role of socio-economic factors.[10]

In the guerrilla war, independent women's units were formed, as was later an independent women's army—a practice that was adopted by the Syrian Kurdish movement when it organized the YPJ. The motivation was that this freed women from the sexism of male comrades and forced them to break with traditional notions of female obedience and servility. In mixed organs of the PKK and PYD, a mandatory gender quota exists. The leaderships have to include at least 40 percent women, and executive posts are shared by one man and one woman.

The PKK's thinking is strongly essentialist. Not only are women and nature often equated, women as such are assumed to have certain characteristics, such as empathy, an abhorrence of violence, and a closeness to nature. The PKK discourse on women's liberation sees the category of women, one it often regards as a homogeneous whole, as superseding political differences. As its women's organization stated, "The women's liberation ideology is an alternative for all hitherto existing world-views, whether of the Left or of the Right."[11] Today it is women as such who are assumed to be the vanguard of the struggle for liberation.

In the nineties, themes of class struggle and class formation largely disappeared from the PKK's ideology. As it moved from the Stalinist idea that socialism means a party-state that owns the means of production to the idea of the creation of a "new man," the PKK's conception of socialism became more abstract, increasingly receding into the future. "Democratic civilization" replaced an independent, socialist Kurdistan as the goal of the PKK movement. PKK expert Joost Jongerden describes "democratic civilization" as the umbrella term for three intertwined projects: democratic republic, democratic autonomy, and democratic confederalism.[12] The democratic republic entails a reform of the Turkish state, to recognize the existence of minorities, especially Kurds, among its population and to dissociate citizenship from Turkish ethnicity—similarly, the PYD suggests the

Syrian state should abandon the pan-Arabist ideology of the Ba'ath party.

Democratic autonomy is a concept borrowed from Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), a U.S. libertarian socialist, and refers to a combination of social movements and cooperatives that would pre-figure a future egalitarian society. Bookchin was a Trotskyist when World War II ended and, like many Trotskyists, expected to see a wave of working-class social revolutions. When this did not happen, and the Trotskyist movement remained small and isolated, Bookchin reconsidered his ideas.

Bookchin gave up on Marxism, which in his eyes had made a fundamental mistake in seeing the working class as the revolutionary subject. Likewise, the PKK never saw the self-emancipation of the working class as leading the way to socialism. The early PKK was rather distrustful of the working class, which it saw as privileged compared to the peasantry and as too closely associated with the Turkish state in the city. In the early nineties, Öcalan stated that there were no pronounced class divisions in Kurdish society.[13] The real dividing line was between "collaborators" and "patriots," not between capitalists and working people.

For Bookchin, capitalism's weak point was not the contradiction capital-labor, but the contradiction capital-ecology. Capital, endlessly accumulating, destroys the environment. The struggle to save the ecosystem takes on an anti-capitalist character and can unite everybody who sees their lives threatened by the deterioration of the natural environment and who rebels against their alienation from it. Although today the PKK also considers ecology an important issue, for them it is not as central as it was for Bookchin.

For Öcalan, the contradiction driving liberation struggles is that between oppressed identities and the state. The oppression of certain identities is blamed by Öcalan on state policies that are lagging behind the development of the new civilization, a development that is unavoidable because of technological progress.[14] The task is to make the state allow the realization of the democratic potential that already exists. To this end, structures of "democratic autonomy" are supposed to be built across existing state borders and inside the existing nation-states. These structures are based on recognizing and representing different identities, like ethnic groups, women, or workers. In Turkish Kurdistan, these structures are often intertwined with those of municipalities where legal Kurdish parties have been elected.

Structures of democratic autonomy should federate from the bottom up, in a system of "democratic confederalism." Öcalan describes this as "a pyramid-like model of organization. Here it is the communities who talk, debate and make decisions. From the base to the top the elected delegates would form a kind of loose coordinating body. They will be the elected representatives of the people for one year."[15]

The PKK ideology today rejects attempts to set up new states, seeing them as inherently oppressive. Seeds of the current PKK critique of states as such can be found already in its early history. From its beginning, the PKK criticized the Soviet Union and the Communist International of the early twenties for their critical support of Kemalist nationalism. Moreover, in the PKK's eyes, the Soviet leadership prioritized the national security of the Soviet Union over internationalist and anti-imperialist principles. The critique of the supremacy of Soviet *raison d'état* was generalized to nation-states as such. Another impetus for the PKK to abandon its project of a Kurdish nation-state was the multifaceted character of the population it considered to be Kurdish. For example, in parts of Turkish Kurdistan, identities had evolved along confessional lines. In Eastern Anatolia, the PKK was confronted with the fact that many people considered themselves Alevites, not Kurds.[16] To create a unified nation-state out of this heterogeneity would have required cultural assimilation, something to which the PKK was opposed.

Öcalan claims the PKK's struggle is only the latest Kurdish rebellion against centralized state power. In a remarkable example of auto-orientalism, Kurds are presented as a people without history that since Sumerian times (fourth millennium BC) has rebelled against state power, all the while remaining "in essence" the same. The "original sin" that caused the Kurds' oppression was the formation of the state as such, against which they tried to preserve their "natural" free culture. Öcalan describes his goal as a "renaissance" of an idealized society that during the Neolithic supposedly existed in what is now Kurdistan. The positive aspects of this mythic past—a central role for women in society, a "pure" Kurdish identity, social egalitarianism—are to return in a modern form.

Öcalan is not in favor of overthrowing existing states. Rather, these should be superseded at some point by the structures of democratic confederalism. Öcalan's critique of existing states is rather ambiguous in that the democracy he praises is often equated with the parliamentary, capitalist states of the West. For example, he claims that in European countries a "determined democracy" developed and that this led to the "supremacy of the West." "Western civilization can, in this sense, be termed democratic civilization."[17] And in 2011: "In principle, the Western democratic system—which has been established through immense sacrifices—contains everything needed for solving social problems."[18] "Europe, [democracy's] birthplace, has by and large left nationalism behind in view of the wars of the twentieth century and established a political system adhering to democratic standards. This democratic system has already shown its advantages over other systems—including real socialism—and is now the only acceptable system worldwide."[19]

Class and Economy in Rojava

Capitalist development has not progressed far in Rojava. It is a mainly agricultural region with only a small modern working class. But Rojava is very productive, and in Ba'athist Syria it resembled an internal colony. The region produced raw materials like wheat and oil that were processed somewhere else.[20] Öcalan has described the socio-economic situation in Rojava as one where on the one hand there were small, family-based economic units and on the other hand the state economy.[21]

Öcalan's vision of a socio-economic alternative to such conditions can be described as social-democratic: "In my eyes, justice demands that creative work is enumerated according to its contribution to the entire product. Remuneration of creative work, which contributes to the productivity of the society, has to be in proportion to other creative activities. Provision of employment to everybody will be a general public task. Everybody will be able to participate in the health care system, education, sports and arts according to their capabilities and needs."[22]

The relatively vague economic proposals of the PYD for Rojava can also be called social democratic. The goal is a mixed economy with strong social services. The "social contract" of Rojava declares natural resources and land to be property of the people and their exploitation to be regulated by law. At the same time, the contract protects private property and declares that nothing shall be expropriated. About 20 percent of the land in Rojava is in the hands of landlords, and their property is protected by the social contract. Formerly state-owned farms have been distributed among poor families. The formation of cooperatives is encouraged by Tev-Dem (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, or Movement for a Democratic Society), the governing structure of Rojava. In the longer term, cooperatives are supposed to become the dominant form of enterprise.

The PYD speaks of Rojava as a new experience, a new kind of revolution based on lessons drawn from the failure of earlier movements. The same applies to the choice of not expropriating property, explained as part of the refusal to use force in order to avoid the authoritarianism that disfigured earlier attempts to create socialism. The refusal of the PYD to expel Syrian government troops completely from Rojava and to join the insurgency against Assad is claimed to be based on the same

refusal of force. However, it was the uprising against the Syrian state that gave the Kurdish movement the chance to form Rojava as the Assad regime decided to focus on fighting the rebels.

We should be careful not to project Euro-centric ideas of socialist revolution on Rojava. But in the absence of a working class that in its struggle for self-emancipation can be the driving force of social change, it is clearly the PYD itself that is playing the decisive role. Before being largely wiped away by the two counter-revolutionary poles of the Assad regime and Salafi jihadism, autonomous self-organization was an important element in the Syrian revolution, as shown by the grassroots structures that sprung up across Syria in the earlier phase of the revolution. The councils in Rojava, however, are the initiative of a political force, not of autonomous bottom-up initiatives. The PYD is the dominant force in Tev-Dem. The armed forces in Rojava (YPG, YPJ, and the security forces, the Asayiş) are trained in the ideology of the PYD and swear an oath to Öcalan.

The survival of Rojava against attacks from Islamic State is undoubtedly a victory for the left. The Kurdish movement deserves concrete solidarity in its struggle for self-determination, the more so because in Rojava people are trying to construct a progressive alternative.

There is no reason why the left cannot combine solidarity for the Rojava project with a critical eye on its limitations. Maybe Rojava can ask the question of how to overcome capitalism, but this can be answered only in a wider context in the region, in cooperation with other forces.

Considering the tensions between the Kurdish movement and many Arabs in Syria and abroad, this perspective is increasingly difficult. The decisive role of the PYD in Rojava and its refusal to expel Syrian government troops completely and join the insurgency against Assad has led to accusations that it "cooperates" with the dictatorship. Different Arab rebel groups, but also some other Syrian Kurdish groups, describe Rojava as a "PYD dictatorship."

When there are reports about human rights violations, the first reflex should be serious concern. Amnesty International has sounded the alarm over reports that YPG units have driven away Arab civilians.[23] PYD Co-President Salih Muslim has admitted that YPG fighters made a "mistake" when they opened fire on a group of demonstrators in Âmûde in July 2014.[24] Human Rights Watch has also reported critically of repression of protests in Rojava.[25] Implying that criticism is somehow part of enemy plans—for instance, YPG General Commander Hemo's statement that the timing of the Amnesty International report was "suspicious" "at a time when we are … getting ready to wage a big war against ISIS"—is not very convincing.[26]

Accusations such as these, as well as the stance of the PYD regarding imperialist interventions, create the risk of further damaging relationships between Kurds and Arabs. The cooperation between the YPG and coalition forces, and its offers to cooperate with Russia, most of whose bombardments do not target ISIS, might be understandable in a fight for survival, but the left should not turn a blind eye to the consequences of cooperating with imperialist powers.

In the Western left, "solidarity" often has meant providing support and sympathy for movements in the Global South, movements that were often romanticized, with dreams and hopes of Western leftists projected onto faraway experiences. Disappointment, and the end of links, became almost inevitable. To take seriously the oft-repeated saying that the left should learn from international experiences means it should try to grasp such developments in their complexity and contradictions.

Bibliography

Akkaya, Ahmet Hamdi and Joost Jongerden, “Reassembling the political: the PKK and the project of radical democracy,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2012).

Amnesty International, “*We had nowhere to go”: Forced displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria* (London: 2015).

Aydin, Aysegul and Cem Emrence, *Zones of rebellion. Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish state* (Ithaca: 2015).

Çağlayan, Handan, “From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in Post-1980 Turkey,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012).

Brauns, Nikolas and Brigitte Kiechle, *PKK. Perspektiven des kurdischen Freiheitkampfes: Zwischen Selbsbestimmung, EU und Islam* (Stuttgart: 2010).

Bruinessen, Martin van, “Between guerrilla war and political murder: the Workers’ Party of Kurdistan,” *Middle East Report* (no. 153, July – August 1988), 40-42+44-46+50.

Flach, Anja, Ercan Ayboğo, and Michael Knapp*, Revolution in Rojava. Frauenbewegung und Kommunalismus zwischen Krieg und Embargo* (Hamburg: 2015).

Human Rights Watch, *Under Kurdish Rule. Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria*, 2014.

Grojean, Olivier, “The production of the new man with in the PKK,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2012).

Kimdir, Mutlu Çiviroğlu, “YPG General Commander Hemo on Syrian Democratic Force, US Weapons & Amnesty Report.”

Küpeli, Ismail (ed.), *Kampf um Kobanê. Kampf um die Zukunft des Nahen Ostens* (Műnster: 2015).

Öcalan, Abdullah, *The Declaration of Democratic Confederalism* (2005).

Öcalan, Abdullah, *Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question* (London: 1999).

Öcalan, Abdullah, *The third domain. Reconstructing liberation. Extracts from the submissions to the ECHR* (London: 2003).

Öcalan, Abdullah, *Prison Writings. The PKK and the Kurdish question in the 21st century* (London: 2011).

PKK, *Programm* (Köln: 1984).

Schmidinger, Thomas, *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan. Analysen und Stimmen aus Rojava* (Vienna: 2014).

Footnotes

1. Part of this article is based on a longer piece, “Stalinist caterpillar into libertarian butterfly? The evolving ideology of the PKK.”
2. Martin van Bruinessen, “Between Guerrilla War and Political Murder: The Workers’ Party of Kurdistan,” Middle East Report (No. 153, July-August 1988), 40-42+44-46+50.

3. PKK, Programm (Köln: 1984).
4. Nikolas Brauns and Brigitte Kiechle, PKK. Perspektiven des kurdischen Freiheitkampfe : Zwischen Selbsbestimmung, EU und Islam (Stuttgart: 2010), 57.
5. Abdullah Öcalan, Prison Writings. The PKK and the Kurdish question in the 21st century (London: 2011), 21, 42.
6. Olivier Grojean, "The production of the new man within the PKK," European Journal of Turkish Studies (2012), 4.
7. Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, 77.
8. Handan Çağlayan, "'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in Post-1980 Turkey," European Journal of Turkish Studies (No. 14, 2012), 2.
9. Abdullah Öcalan, "Jineolojî als Wissenschaft der Frau," Einleitende Worte der Herausgeberin.
10. Çağlayan, "From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess," 2.
11. Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, 247.
12. Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "Reassembling the political: the PKK and the project of radical democracy," European Journal of Turkish Studies (2012), 6.
13. Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, 82.
14. Abdullah Öcalan, The third domain. Reconstructing liberation. Extracts from the submissions to the ECHR (London: 2003), 54, 56.
15. Abdullah Öcalan, The Declaration of Democratic Confederalism (2005).
16. Aysegul Aydin and Cem Emrence, Zones of Rebellion. Kurdish Insurgents and the Turkish State (Ithaca: 2015), 40. Alevism is a branch of Shia Islam, while the Turkish state favors a kind of Sunni Islam. Alevism should not be confused with Alawism, another branch of Shia Islam.
17. Abdullah Öcalan, Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question (London: 1999), 59.
18. Abdullah Öcalan, Prison Writings, 71.
19. Öcalan, Prison Writings, 91.
20. Ismail Küpeli (ed.), Kampf um Kobanê. Kampf um die Zukunft des Nahen Ostens (Műnster: 2015), 34.
21. Quoted in RSL 252
22. Öcalan, Prison Writings, 60.
23. Amnesty International, "We had nowhere to go": Forced displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria (London: 2015).
24. Thomas Schmidinger, Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan. Analysen und Stimmen aus Rojava (Vienna: 2014), 186.
25. Human Rights Watch, "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria" (2014).
26. Mutlu Çiviroğlu Kimdir, YPG General Commander Hemo on Syrian Democratic Force, US Weapons & Amnesty Report.