The Kurds, Bookchin, and the Need to Reinvent Revolution

written by Petar Stanchev | January 31, 2016

Today, a year after the heroic resistance of Kobani made it to the world news, it is hardly necessary to give an introduction to the Kurdish struggle, which has now taken a central place in the imagination of the international left, both vanguardist and anti-authoritarian. The autonomy in Rojava and the uprising in North Kurdistan, part of Turkey, shook the world with the determination of both the civilian and armed population, proving the capacity of the Kurdish struggle to mobilize a large number of people and resist an enemy superior in weaponry and numbers, namely the gangs of ISIS, the Syrian regime, and the enormous war machine of the Turkish state. This determination and the brave defiance of death and destruction in the name of a free and egalitarian society captivated the minds of thousands around the globe, some of whom even joined the ranks of the International Brigade in Rojava to fight ISIS and the Syrian regime.[1]

The recent pictures of the city of Cizre resisting the Turkish army's blockade and the stories of the local people's invincible solidarity and self-organization are not only becoming symbols of anti-capitalist and anti-statist resistance on a global scale but are writing an epic that will be of historical importance for the left in the years to come. Nevertheless, this epic should be more than an object of admiration and solidarity; it should be seen as an immense example of revolutionary organization and resistance in the twenty-first century.

What the news from Rojava and North Kurdistan shows is that revolutionary mass organization is possible and has the potential to confront the militaristic and exploitive neo-liberal state and create alternatives to it, here and now. This resistance does not happen in an ideological vacuum; the underlying influence of the U.S. political thinker Murray Bookchin has played a crucial role in the transformation of the Kurdish resistance. His works mirror an evolving critique of the Western revolutionary tradition and practice, a critique that maps a new path to building a movement capable of altering the power relations in society in favor of equality and direct democracy. For this reason, the Kurdish examples can help to understand radical change in the West and how to achieve it, especially in times when it seems that the energy from the mass mobilizations after the 2008 economic crash is being channelled into good old electoral politics.

The examples from Kurdistan cannot, however, simply be reproduced in different social and political contexts but should serve as a keystone in a necessary reassessment of our own political strategies.

The Resurrection of the Kurdish Struggle

The Kurdish liberation movement has gone through different stages, from the foundation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a typical national-liberation Marxist-Leninist vanguard party in the 1970s to a complex configuration of communal assemblies, grassroots organizations, women's assemblies, and, of course, armed militias such as the People's Defense Force (HPG) in Turkey or Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Rojava. This ideological and

organizational shift is the key to understanding the rise of the Kurdish resistance both in Rojava and in North Kurdistan.

The ideological life of the PKK has been marked by the times which the party was established, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the echo of the decolonization period and the struggles for national liberation was still resonating strongly among the wretched of the world. Marxism-Leninism became the dominant liberationist discourse, promising not only national liberation but also the eradication of poverty and exploitation through the establishment of a socialist state. The PKK was not an exception, and it aimed to establish a socialist Kurdish nation-state.

The PKK-aligned guerrillas defiantly fought the Turkish army, which opened a total war on the Kurds and their resistance. As a result, more than two million people were displaced, forty thousand killed, and many villages as well as the forests of Kurdistan were turned into ashes as part of the Turkish counterinsurgency. The 1990s were a particularly difficult period, marked by internal conflicts in the PKK, fratricide, and power struggle. Abdullah Öcalan himself admits in his prison writings, referring to this stage of the history of the movement, "We killed the best of our own comrades."[2] The bipolar world of the Cold War was over, and the PKK, despite its continuing resistance, was in ideological and organizational crisis, culminating in the capture of Öcalan by Turkish federal agents and his imprisonment on the Turkish island of Imrali, which was a significant blow considering the central role to the movement its leader plays.

This crisis could have been fatal for the PKK and could have turned it into a historical relic with a weakening popular base and deepening sectarian division from society. Paradoxically, the state terror and internal meltdown gave the Kurdish movement the necessary push to re-examine its ideological foundations, its aims, and means of struggle and to undertake a deep transformation.

Locked in solitary confinement on an island where he was and still is the only prisoner, Öcalan was influenced by the writing of a number of social theorists and specifically the U.S. political thinker Murray Bookchin. Bookchin's theory of libertarian municipalism, strongly influenced by anarchism, became the cornerstone for the PKK's evolving ideology.

Murray Bookchin was born in New York in 1921, and the trajectory of his political progression followed the timeline of the twentieth century, turning his works into a constant search for a political and a social strategy that can bring about a different, more just society. Initially Stalinist, Bookchin later went through a Trotskyist period after his disillusionment with the Soviet Union's brutal dictatorship and eventually embraced anarchism, rejecting the authoritarian and outdated ideas of the vanguardist left. During his anarchist period, Bookchin wrote some of his most important works, including *The Ecology of Freedom*, considered by some to be his biggest contribution. His constant need to redefine and critically re-examine revolutionary thought finally led him to break with the anarchist tradition and create a new political and social theory based on the idea of dual power and confederated libertarian municipalities.

Bookchin's works were spread in Kurdistan and read and discussed by the militants of the PKK. The shift was tremendous: a vanguard, Marxist-Leninist, and nationalist revolutionary organization, deadlocked in internal violence, over a couple of years embraced a totally new paradigm, rejecting the nation-state, hierarchy, and patriarchy and restructuring the entire struggle around these new principles. Öcalan's rendition of Bookchin's political and social theory is summed up in his books *Democratic Confederalism* and *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution.*

What we see today in Kurdistan, whether in its Syrian part, Rojava, or in North Kurdistan, Iraq, or Iran, is a complex system of grassroots organizations, united under the umbrella of KCK, the Group of Communities in Kurdistan. KCK includes political parties, such as Democratic Union Party (PYD)

and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Syria and Turkey, community assemblies, women's organizations, and minority groups and aims to establish a society based on direct democratic assemblies, communes, and cooperatives, which would replace the structures of the state and transcend the national borders through confederation.

This dream is neither far-fetched nor a plan for the distant future. In Rojava, northern Syria, following the withdrawal of Assad troops in 2012, the PYD and its armed militias, the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), took over the predominantly Kurdish-populated northern areas that now constitute the three autonomous cantons, Afrin, Kobani and Cizre. The takeover created the opportunity for a radical implementation of the idea of democratic confederalism. The results, as described by various people who got to know the situation on the ground, are impressive: land and production units, previously owned by local bourgeoisie and by the regime, are collectivized, and municipality-based communes run the everyday life in the towns and villages.[3] Women have 40 percent guaranteed participation in all forms of government, while ethnic and religious minorities are encouraged to practice their culture and have their own representation. New educational structures, such as the Mesopotamian Social Science Academy, the first university opened in Rojava after the revolution, challenge eurocentrism, hierarchy, and professionalization in academia.[4] Gender is at the center of the revolutionary process, and women are seen as a new form of proletariat that has suffered long-standing and brutal oppression in the face of patriarchy. For this reason, women organize their own assemblies, academies, and organizations and have their own armed force, the YPJ.[5] Despite the economic hardship produced by the embargo on Rojava and the lack of international recognition of the autonomous cantons, such examples demonstrate the enormous revolutionary potential of the Kurdish struggle and ideology. Far from perfect, the autonomy in northern Syria should, of course, be seen as a process in development not as a utopia.

The civil war, unleashed after the June 2015 general elections in Turkey, gives another example of the strength of the Kurdish movement and its ideological values. Prior to the elections and after the HDP, also part of the KCK, surpassed the 10 percent electoral barrier, the Turkish army carried out bombings and attacks on both the PKK armed wing, HPG, and civilians in the Kurdish areas. The war, unleashed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was a clear provocation, aimed at crushing the growing Kurdish resistance and its attempts to create a progressive alternative for the whole country, beyond the Kurdish-populated regions. The Turkish army besieged the city of Cizre and held captive its 120,000 inhabitants, killing at least dozens including babies and elderly people.[6] Racist mobs, organized and inspired by the AKP, took the streets of the big Turkish cities, lynching people and burning down the HDP offices and Kurdish businesses.

The Kurdish movement's response produced an ideological defeat for the AKP. Instead of bloody retaliation, the PKK narrowed the actions of its armed wing to self-defense and called for peace, encouraging towns, neighborhoods, and villages to declare autonomy and self-governance. Dozens followed, including a neighborhood in Istanbul, and recent news suggests that 15 new cities are to follow.[7] The atmosphere in Cizre, as described in reports, was one of mass solidarity, self-organization, and defiance of the Turkish war machine; eventually these elements, combined with a peace march headed by the HDP, managed to break the blockade. This resistance, facing the second-largest NATO army, which does not hesitate to bomb and kill civilians, is a product of decades of organizing but particularly of building democratic alternatives just as in Rojava. The ideology of democratic confederalism has also been implemented for years in North Kurdistan, and despite the existence of the Turkish state, hundreds of alternative government structures, assemblies, cooperatives, and academies have been established.

The given examples are hardly enough to describe the revolutionary process in Kurdistan and the

achievements of the Bookchin-inspired democratic confederalism. What the communes of Rojava and North Kurdistan, the defense of Kobani and Cizre, or the empowerment of women in the region demonstrate is the capacity of the Kurdish movement to establish radical anti-statist and anti-capitalist alternatives and, if necessary, to defend them. This revolutionary potential is a product of decades of struggle but also of the ideological transformation of the PKK after the capture of Öcalan.

Reinventing revolution instead of sinking into ideological narrow-mindedness and sectarianism gave the PKK the opportunity to resurrect itself from a profound crisis and become an inspiration for thousands around the world who believe in an egalitarian, gender-equal, and democratic society. Thus the Kurdish resistance shifted from being a traditional vanguard party that sees the revolution as finality and applies a ready-made trajectory to achieve it, to a Zapatista-like movement, which walks and asks questions, instead of giving orders. The capacity to challenge one's direction, questioning the strategies and tactics for achieving a different society in a changing world, seems to be the crucial explanation for the new rise of the Kurdish struggle and should be a seen as one of the great lessons that can be derived from it.

Bookchin and the Critique of the Western Left

Now more than ever, Bookchin's ideas seem to offer a valuable critique of both Marxism and modern-day anarchism, drawing the framework of a practical political alternative to capitalist exploitation of the human being and the environment and to statist violence.

His analysis focuses on the failure of the Marxist left to re-examine its narrow economic analysis and the concept of the proletariat as a leading evolutionary force, something that might have seemed self-evident in the late nineteenth century but clearly does not encompass the complexity of modern capitalism. Bookchin claims that the economic determinism of Marxism has failed to address the dynamic development of capitalism after World War II, and as a result leftist thought has stagnated into either post-structuralist emptiness or sectarianism. He rejects electoral politics on a national level and the obsession with taking power, giving numerous examples for the ever-repeating scenario of a progressive party winning elections and soon being co-opted to serve both capital and the state.

Bookchin's critique of anarchism focuses on syndicalism as well as contemporary anarchism. The former he sees as outdated in an era when the industrial proletariat simply does not exist in the way it did when Bakunin and Kropotkin were alive. Modern anarchism, Bookchin claims, is characterised by a deep aversion to organization and bears problematic notions of individualism.

What is Bookchin's hypothesis regarding a strategy that can lead to a revolutionary change? He argues that power as such cannot be completely abolished but instead should be given a concrete, institutionalized, emancipatory form.[8] He proposed the concept of dual power, claiming that the only way to avoid totalitarian tendencies is to create a clear structure that does not allow the abuse of power. Bookchin argues in favor of organization that is "enduring, structured, and broadly pragmatic"[9] and that has a long-term strategy, including running for municipal elections and reorganizing the municipalities around popular assemblies. This idea stems from his historical analysis of the municipality as a traditional opposition to the state and the dichotomy between politics and statecraft. The former he sees as the direct participation of the citizen in policymaking, despite the way "politics" is used nowadays as synonymous with "statecraft."

Such municipalities, confederated in a wide network where the policymaking is horizontal and is coordinated by an administrative apparatus, can be the foundation for the dissolution of the state and capitalism. Bookchin believes that what can turn humanity against capitalism might not be

rooted only in class issues but in a more sophisticated network of oppression, emphasising the degradation of the environment but also touching on issues of race, gender, and others.[10]

These ideas have been the foundation for Öcalan's democratic confederalism, which we see being put in practice in the different parts of Kurdistan nowadays and achieving a reconfiguration of the power structure, both institutional and interpersonal. Without any doubt, his rendition of Bookchin's ideas and their adaptation to the context of Kurdistan demonstrates once again the constant need to redefine and re-examine revolutionary strategy. As Bookchin himself says, a revolutionary practice, based on the ideas of libertarian municipalism, should be seen as a process, not as finality,[11] a view which by itself is essential to avoiding totalitarian tendencies. His ideas bridge the Kurdish struggle and the West and give an analytical foundation for reassessing our strategy toward building a movement that can offer a genuine alternative to the current social and political system.

Meanwhile, the resurrection of the social-democratic ghost in the face of emerging parties such as the Greek Syriza and the Spanish Podemos and the rise of leftist candidates such as Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders demonstrates both the necessity of a political alternative in the West and how easily such a need can be filled by political forces who are hardly a structural opposition to capitalism or the state. The energy of years of street politics, mass assemblies, and square occupations since the economic crash in 2008 seems to be funnelled into election rallies and admiration for new messianic white men with flame in their eyes and grand promises for the public. The unimpressive failure of Syriza to stick to its promises to challenge austerity, the continuing harsh repression against social movements, and the ongoing plight of refugees in Greece and the ambiguous stand towards ecological issues such as the Skouries mine in the north of the country demonstrate the dead end of rebranded old-school electoral politics. The mass square occupations of Syntagma, 15M, and Occupy, although successful in reaching a large number of people and practicing direct democratic assemblies, failed to offer a structure that could transcend the initial momentum of the mobilizations and thus proved ineffective in achieving a large societal transformation. In this context the example of Kurdistan contrasts sharply with the failure of the Western left to create alternatives and organize successfully and should inspire a fresh discussion of our political strategies.

Without any doubt, the model of the Rojava or North Kurdistan communes and assemblies cannot be reproduced and copied in the Western world, and it should not be. What it shows is the necessity of questioning the way we do politics. Instead of falling into the trap of sectarian repetition of slogans and clichés, we should honestly examine our failures and try to scrap the frameworks and strategies that do not lead anywhere. As Bookchin wrote in his essay *The Communalist Project*, the twenty-first century has the potential to be either the most radical of times or the most reactionary, and it all depends on us and our capacity to successfully organize. Beyond the end of history lies a future of uncertainty, full of questions and challenges but also of opportunities for transforming society, as the example of Kurdistan demonstrates. Facing the choice between humanity, dignity, and sustainability on one side and barbarism, environmental collapse, and self-annihilation on the other, do we have any other choice but reinventing revolution?

Footnotes

1. Kurdish Question, "Around 500 Europeans Fighting in the Ranks of the YPG."
2. Abdullah Öcalan, Prison Writings Volume II: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century (London: Pluto Press, 2011).
3. Janet Biehl, "Rojava's Threefold Economy."
4. Janet Biehl, "Two Academies in Rojava."
5. Margaret Owen, "Gender and Justice in an Emerging Nation: My impressions of Rojava, Syrian

Kurdistan."
6. Joris Leverink, "Cizre Cries for Help: Turkey's Kobanê Under Siege."
7. Kurdish Question, "Kurds to Discuss Self-Rule in 15 Cities of North Kurdistan."
8. Murray Bookchin, The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 144.
9. Bookchin, 180.
10. Bookchin, 156.
11. Bookchin, 29.