

Murray Bookchin and the Kurdish resistance

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The introduction to the new book *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (Verso, 2015), explains how Murray Bookchin – born to Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City in 1921 – was introduced to radical politics at the age of nine when he joined the Young Pioneers, a Communist youth organization. This would be the start of his ‘life on the left’ in which he would turn from Stalinism to Trotskyism in the years running up to World War II before defining himself as an anarchist in the late 1950s and eventually identifying as a ‘communist’ or ‘libertarian municipalist’ after the introduction of the idea of social ecology.

Even though Bookchin never even attended college – except for a few classes in radio technology right after World War II – he wrote dozens of books and published hundreds of academic articles, besides founding several journals and setting up the Institute for Social Ecology in 1974. Possibly his most important contribution to radical politics was to (re)introduce the concept of ecology to the arena of political thought.

Bookchin opposed the ideas and practices of the emerging environmentalist movements, accusing them of advocating mere “technical fixes” of capitalism, counter-posing it to an ecological approach that seeks to address the root causes of the systemic problem. In his view, capitalism’s fatal flaw lay not in its exploitation of the working class, as Marxists believe, but rather in its conflict with the natural environment which, if allowed to develop unopposed, would inevitably lead to the dehumanization of people and the destruction of nature.

The Next Revolution includes the 1992 essay *The Ecological Crisis and the Need to Remake Society*. In it, Bookchin argues that “the most fundamental message that social ecology advances is that the very *idea* of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human.” For an ecological society to develop, first the inter-human domination must be eradicated. According to Bookchin, “capitalism and its alter-ego, ‘state socialism,’ have brought all the historic problems of domination to a head,” and the market economy, if it is not stopped, will succeed in destroying our natural environment as a result of its “grow or die” ideology.

For years, Bookchin sought to convince anarchist groups in the US that his idea of libertarian municipalism – which, in his own words “seeks to reclaim the public sphere for the exercise of authentic citizenship while breaking away from the bleak cycle of parliamentarism and its mystification of the ‘party’ mechanism as a means for public representation” – was the key to making anarchism politically and socially relevant again.

Libertarian municipalism promotes the use of direct face-to-face assemblies in order to “steal” the practice of politics back from the professional, careerist politicians and place it back in the hands of citizens. Describing the state as “a completely alien formation” and a “thorn in the side of human development,” Bookchin presents libertarian municipalism as “democratic to its core and non-hierarchical in its structure,” as well as “premised on the struggle to achieve a rational and ecological society.”

Much to Bookchin’s frustration, many anarchists refused to adopt his ideas, unwilling to accept that, in order to remain politically relevant and be able to make a real revolution, they would have to participate in local government. Despite having politically matured in the company of Marxists, syndicalists and anarchists, Bookchin soon developed and maintained fundamental critiques of all of these currents, leading not only to the development of his own idea of social ecology but also leaving him with many critics on the left.

Kurdish resistance

In the late 1970s, while Bookchin was struggling to gain recognition for the value and importance of his theory of social ecology in the US, an entirely different struggle was emerging on the other side of the world. In the mountainous, predominantly Kurdish regions of southeastern Turkey, an organization was founded that would eventually come to adopt and adapt Bookchin's social ecology.

The organization called itself the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK after its Kurdish acronym, and in 1984 it launched its first attacks against the Turkish state. These first operations were soon followed by others and eventually developed into a three-decade long armed struggle that has still not been resolved.

The PKK was inspired by Marxist-Leninist thought and fought for an independent Kurdish state that would be founded upon socialist principles. The traditional Kurdish homeland encompasses territories in modern-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, but had been carved up in the early 20th century, when a deal was struck regarding the division of former Ottoman-Turkish territory in the Middle East between France and the United Kingdom. The borders between Turkey, Syria and Iraq were laid down in the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916.

Despite the utopian desire of one day seeing the different Kurdish territories united, the struggle of the PKK focused primarily on the liberation of North Kurdistan, or *Bakur* — the Kurdish territories occupied by the Turkish state. Over the course of the 1990s, however, the PKK slowly started to drift away from its desire to found an independent Kurdish nation state and started exploring other possibilities.

In 1999, Abdullah Öcalan — founder and leader of the PKK — became the subject of a diplomatic row between Turkey and Syria, from where he had been directing the PKK's operations after having been forced to flee Turkey two decades earlier. Syria refused to house and protect the rebel leader any longer, leaving Öcalan with little choice but to leave the country in search of another refuge. Not long after, he was arrested in Kenya and extradited to Turkey where he was condemned to death — a punishment that was later changed to life imprisonment.

Öcalan's capture was a breaking point for the PKK's independence struggle. Shortly afterwards, the organization revoked its claims to an independent state in favor of demanding more autonomy at the local level. In jail, Öcalan began to familiarize himself with the works of Bookchin, whose writings on social transformation influenced him to give up on the ideal of an independent nation-state and rather pursue an alternative course he termed 'Democratic Confederalism'.

Several years earlier, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the PKK had already started to critically reflect on the concept of the nation state. None of the traditional homelands of the Kurds were exclusively Kurdish. A state founded and controlled by Kurds would thus automatically host large minority groups, creating the potential for the repression of ethnic and religious minorities in the same way the Kurds themselves had been repressed for many years. As such, a Kurdish state increasingly came to be seen as a continuation of, rather than a solution to, the existing problems in the region.

Finally, having analyzed the interdependence of capitalism and the nation state on the one hand, and between patriarchy and centralized state power on the other, Öcalan realized that real freedom and independence could only come about once the movement had severed all ties with these institutionalized forms of repression and exploitation.

Democratic Confederalism

In his 2005 pamphlet, *Declaration of Democratic Confederalism*, Abdullah Öcalan formally and definitively broke with the PKK's earlier aspirations of founding an independent Kurdish nation state. "The system of nation states," he argues in the document, "has become a serious barrier to the development of society and democracy and freedom since the end of the 20th century."

In Öcalan's view, the only way out of the crisis in the Middle East is the establishment of a democratic confederal system "that will derive its strength directly from the people, and not from globalization based on nation states." According to the imprisoned rebel leader, "neither the capitalist system nor the pressure of imperialist forces will lead to democracy; except to serve their own interests. The task is to assist in developing a grassroots-based democracy ... which takes into consideration the religious, ethnic and class differences in society."

Soon after Öcalan's call for the development of a democratic confederalist model, the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) was founded in Diyarbakir. During an assembly in 2011 the body launched its Call for Democratic Autonomy in which it demanded autonomy from the state in the fields of politics, justice, self-defense, culture, society, economics, ecology and diplomacy. The reaction of the Turkish state was predictable: setting out on a path of confrontation and criminalization, it immediately banned the DTK.

It is no coincidence that the idea of Democratic Confederalism, as developed by Öcalan, shows many parallels with Bookchin's ideas of social ecology. In the early 2000s Öcalan had begun to read *Ecology of Freedom* and *Urbanization Without Cities* while in prison and soon after declared himself a student of Bookchin's. Through his lawyers, Öcalan attempted to set up a meeting with the radical thinker to figure out ways in which Bookchin's ideas could be made applicable to the Middle Eastern context.

Unfortunately, due to Bookchin's poor health at the time, this meeting never took place, but he did send a message to Öcalan in May 2004: "My hope is that the Kurdish people will one day be able to establish a free, rational society that will allow their brilliance once again to flourish. They are fortunate indeed to have a leader of Mr. Öcalan's talents to guide them."

In return, and as a form of acknowledgement of Bookchin's critical influence on the Kurdish movement, a PKK assembly honored him as "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century" when he died in July 2006. They expressed their hope that the Kurds would be the first society to establish democratic confederalism, calling the project "creative and realizable."

Dual power, confederalism and social ecology

Over the past decade, democratic confederalism has slowly but surely become an integral part of Kurdish society. Three elements of Bookchin's thought have particularly influenced the development of a "democratic modernity" across Kurdistan: the concept of "dual power," the confederal structure as proposed by Bookchin under the header of libertarian municipalism, and the theory of social ecology which traces the roots of many contemporary struggles back to the origins of civilization and places the natural environment at the heart of the solution to these problems.

Dual Power

The concept of dual power has been one of the main reasons why Bookchin's body of work was rejected by anarchist, communist and syndicalist groups. Rather than advocating the abolition of the state through an uprising of the proletariat, he suggested that by developing alternative institutions in the form of popular assemblies and neighborhood committees — and notably by taking part in municipal elections — the power of the state could be “hollowed out” from below, eventually making it superfluous.

Bookchin's disposition towards taking over and building institutions of power stems from his analysis of politics as opposed to statecraft. According to Bookchin, “Marxists, revolutionary syndicalists, and authentic anarchists all have a fallacious understanding of politics, which should be conceived as the civic arena and the institutions by which people democratically and directly manage their community affairs.” What normally is referred to as “politics” Bookchin views as “statecraft,” or the kind of business professional politicians occupy themselves with.

“Politics,” by contrast, rather than a kind of inherently evil practice that so many left-wing revolutionaries believe needs to be abolished, is in fact the very glue that binds society together. It is something that needs to be organized in such a way as to prevent any abuse of power. “Freedom from authoritarianism can best be assured only by the clear, concise, and detailed allocation of power, not by pretensions that power and leadership are forms of ‘rule’ or by libertarian metaphors that conceal their reality,” Bookchin writes in his essay *The Communalist Project*.

The Kurdish embrace of Bookchin's idea of dual power is clear from the DTK's mode of organization at the different levels of society. The general assembly of the DTK meets twice a year in Diyarbakir, the *de facto* capital of North Kurdistan. Of the 1,000 delegates, 40 percent are elected officials who occupy different positions within government institutions, whereas the remaining 60 percent come from civil society and can be either members of one of the popular assemblies, representatives of NGOs or unaffiliated individuals. Decisions made in the assembly are promoted in the city council by those members who occupy seats in both organizational bodies.

Confederalism

The confederal system is also clearly manifested in the organizational structure of the DTK. In *The Meaning of Confederalism*, Bookchin describes confederalism as “a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities.” This explanation is an almost perfect fit with the situation on the ground in many places in the Kurdish region — in Turkey as well as in northern Syria.

A clear example is the situation in Diyarbakir, where the council movement is particularly well established. In the book *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, the situation is explained by members of the Amed City Council (Amed being the Kurdish name for Diyarbakir):

Amed has thirteen districts, and each one has a council with its own board. Within the districts there are neighborhoods, which have neighborhood councils. Some districts have as many as eight neighborhood councils. And some places have councils even at the street level. In the nearby villages, there are communes that are tied to the city council. So power is articulated deeper and deeper into the base.

As Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Akkaya write in *Confederalism and autonomy in Turkey*: “the DTK is not simply another organization, but part of the attempt to forge a new political paradigm, defined by the direct and continual exercise of the people’s power through village, town and city councils.”

It is worth noting that this new political paradigm is not only advocated by those initiatives that exist *outside* of the institutionalized political realm, but also by pro-Kurdish political parties such as the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) and the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). The ultimate goal is not to establish Democratic Autonomy exclusively in the Kurdish regions, but at the national level too, both in Turkey and Syria.

Social ecology

Bookchin’s theory of social ecology is characterized by the belief that “we must reorder social relations so that humanity can live in a protective balance with the natural world.” A post-capitalist society cannot be successful unless it is created in harmony with the ecological environment.

Bookchin argues that “the most fundamental message that social ecology advances is that the very *idea* of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human.” Social ecology moves beyond the traditional Marxist and anarchist view of how to organize a non-hierarchical, egalitarian society in that it places the need to avert an impending ecological catastrophe at the heart of contemporary social struggles.

For the Kurds, traditionally a rural people living on agriculture and animal husbandry, maintaining the ecological environment is as crucial as creating an egalitarian society. State-driven destruction of the environment in their mountainous homelands and on the fertile Mesopotamian plain is occurring on a daily basis.

The most obvious example is the GAP project in Turkey, in which dozens of mega dams have either already been built or are under construction. The project is presented as bringing development to the region in the form of employment opportunities at the construction sites, better irrigated mega-farms producing cash crops for export, and providing day jobs for the expropriated small farmers and an upgraded energy infrastructure with the construction of several hydroelectric power plants.

What is perceived as “development” by the agents of the state is experienced in an entirely different way by the people who see their homes and villages flooded, the free-flowing rivers turned into commodities, their lands being expropriated and bought up by large corporations and used for the industrial-scale production of goods that serve no purpose but to enrich the farm-owners in their faraway villas. These large-scale, highly destructive mega-projects expose the urgent need for local control over local environments.

But whereas wresting the natural environment away from the destructive claws of ever encroaching capitalist forces entails a direct confrontation with the state, a crucial first — and potentially even more revolutionary — step involves the abolition of hierarchy at the interpersonal level. Since, as Bookchin argued, the domination of humans over nature stems from the domination of one human over another, the solution has to follow a similar trajectory.

In this regard, the emancipation of women is one of the most important aspects of social ecology. As long as the domination of man over woman remains intact, the treatment of our

natural environment as an essential and integral part of human life — rather than a commodity to be exploited for our benefit — is still far away.

In this regard, the emancipatory projects currently underway in Kurdish society are a hopeful sign. Although in many cases social relations within Kurdish families and society are still guided by age-old customs and traditions, radical changes can already be observed. As one activist of the Amed Women's Academy put it in an interview with Tatort Kurdistan:

Kurdish families still aren't really open to the new system, Democratic Autonomy. They haven't yet internalized it. We, the activists, have very much internalized it and it's our responsibility to make change, to impart the ideas of Democratic Autonomy to families, even if it's only in small steps. We can start talking about it at home the way we do outside. When our families see how seriously we take it, that will affect them. Of course, discussions are often very difficult. Doors get slammed, people shout. But a lot of perseverance and discussion has also begun to create change in families.

Listen, learn and follow

The developments in Kurdistan — and especially in Rojava, the Kurdish region in northern Syria — have tickled the radical imagination of activists around the globe. The revolution in Rojava has been compared to Barcelona in 1936 and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. The radical left needs its own mythology as much as everybody else, and in this sense Rojava, Barcelona and Chiapas serve as hopeful reminders that there *is* an alternative; that it *is* possible to organize society in a different way.

However, by merely placing these instances of radical organization on a pedestal, as a beacon of hope to be revered when times get rough, our support for these struggles is often not very different from the support we display when we cheer on our favorite football team on TV. The Zapatistas in the jungles of Chiapas and the Kurds on the Mesopotamian plains have come a long way by relying on nothing but their own strength and determination. Their relative isolation has allowed for the development of their radical alternatives, but for these experiments to survive in the long run they need more than supporters and sympathizers. They need partners.

“Global capital, precisely because of its very hugeness, can only be eaten away at its roots,” Bookchin writes in *A Politics for the Twenty-First Century*, “specifically by means of a libertarian municipalist resistance at the base of society. It must be eroded by the myriad millions who, mobilized by a grassroots movement, challenge global capital's sovereignty over their lives and try to develop local and regional economic alternatives to its industrial operations.”

Bookchin believes that if our ideal is a Commune of Communes, the natural place to start is at the local political level, with a movement and program as the “uncompromising advocate of popular neighborhood and town assemblies and the development of a municipalized economy.”

Ultimately, the best way to support the struggles of the Kurds, the Zapatistas and many other revolutionary movements and initiatives that have sprung up across the globe in the past few years, is by listening to their stories, learning from their experiences and following in their footsteps.

A confederation of self-organized municipalities, transcending national borders and ethnic and religious boundaries is the best bulwark against the ever-encroaching imperialist powers

and capitalist forces. In the struggle to achieve this goal, there are worse examples to follow than the ideas set out by Murray Bookchin and the practice of libertarian municipalism.

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<https://roarmag.org/essays/bookchin-kurdish-struggle-ocalan-rojava/>
Bookchin's municipalist ideas, once rejected by communists and anarchists alike, have now
come to inspire the Kurdish quest for democratic autonomy.

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