

Radical Democracy in Practice

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Abstract

The article “Democratic Confederalism and its practice” by Michael Knapp aims at presenting the concept of Democratic Confederalism applied in the Kurdish areas of Turkey and Syria as a concept of cohabitation and grassroots democracy. Starting with a discussion on the impact of national state in the Middle East a background for the theoretical development of Democratic Confederalism shall be prepared. The author will show, that the Concept of Democratic Confederalism developed by the imprisoned chairman of the PKK Abdullah Öcalan is inspired on one hand by the social reality of the Middle East and its history, on the other hand by communalists like Murray Bookchin and supporters of concepts of direct democracy and council democracy like Hannah Arendt and Rosa Luxemburg. The author will show in the article the difference between state oriented federalism and confederalism. To explain the difference of these two points the author will present the role of national state and its criticism in the Kurdish movement and its historical context in the Middle East. The model of grassroots democracy exemplified in the Kurdish regions in Rojava/Northern Syria will be presented as a consequence of this criticism.

Introduction

The terms ‘Rojava’ and ‘Kobani’ were widely unknown until autumn 2014 – when with the fierce battle against the so called Islamic State (IS) these terms became commonplace connected with an iconography of female fighters battling against the worst form of terror. While these pictures were broadcasted the ideology behind those female fighters emerge in the Middle East remained in the public discourse widely obscure. Even on the ground not much of research had been done. The ideology of the PKK has mostly been analyzed under the paradigm of counter-terrorism and criminology. Jongerden and Akkaya have filled this gap with their analyses of history and ideology of the PKK in the context of Kemalism in Turkey. They used a combination of interviews and the analyses of the writings of the imprisoned chairman of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan.

For this article author worked with the prison writings of Abdullah Öcalan, declarations of the organs of the PKK and especially through data he collected on his research in Rojava – making interviews with persons on all stages of the model of democratic autonomy and participant observation at council meetings, public discussions and other occasions. The experiences with democratic confederalism in the Middle East will be linked to the international discourse on council democracy.

The article consists mainly of two parts; the first part will set the scene by describing briefly the impact of nationalist ideas on the Middle East. In the second part the development of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan, from a ‘classical’ Marxist-Leninist liberation movement to an ideology of radical democracy will be shown. The third part is portraying the concept of radical democracy and democratic autonomy in the context of its practice in Rojava. This discussion will be linked to the political and philosophic debate on models of council or radical democracy and historical experiences.

Democratic Confederalism as Model of radical Democracy in practice

After the crackdown of statist socialism in the end of the last centuries' 80ies and beginning of its 90ies, the advocates of capitalism and neoliberalism tried to present them without alternative. The Margaret Thatcher's slogan TINA "There is no alternative" seemed for many to have proven true. Even in the libertarian circles which never had a close relation to state socialism this development reflected itself in a palpable renaissance of "anarchocapitalist" ideas or a retreat into privacy. The traditional left in Europe experienced a heavy reverse, while in countries like Germany nationalism gained more importance in the discourse around state and economy. It might seem at first contradictory that nationalism and neoliberalism developed in a kind of symbiosis after "the end of history". But with the emergence of argumentations in which the state was more and more defined as an institution by competing with other states' over its attractiveness for "globalized" capital through lower wages and less protection for workers it became clear that this wasn't a contradiction. Ludwig Hirsch called this the "national competition state," which he defines as the economic-political project of neoliberalism which means surrendering all parts of society under the paradigm of the ability of national competition. In that way the emergence of neo-nationalism and neoliberalism are connected.

This situation of crisis for social-emancipatory ideas and movements had the potential to become a chance for reflecting critically on the tools of social liberation, like Marxism Leninism and the concepts of national liberation struggles.

Not many liberation movements survived this decisive historical process and new actors appeared on the stage of history – the emergence of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas in Mexico on the first of January 1994 was one of the first signs of this change of paradigm in revolutionary movements worldwide. Their concept of national liberation, while reflected in its acronym EZLN, differed decisively from the model of national state – so it is explicitly based on difference and radical democracy in assembly structure. It was centered on the basis of the indigenous societies of Chiapas and it's forms of self-representation. The model of the EZLN is based on empowerment and emancipation of the rural population in form of assemblies and not on modernism. While this was for many leftists in Europe, the USA and Australia a sign of hope widely unrecognized another movement in the Middle East undertook its steps into the direction of radical democracy and even deeper criticism of national state than the EZLN. Today we see in the mainly Kurdish regions in the Middle East, especially in Northern Syria/Rojava and in East Turkey/Bakur a model of radical democracy spreading widely as a consequence of 40 years of struggle of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK. To understand how this reality came into being inspired by a former classical Marxist Leninist anticolonial movement of national liberation we have first to understand its shift to a communalist anti national and anti-state movement. Therefore we've got to delve into the history of the movement and the Middle East with its recent crisis.

As we can date national statehood in Europe to the 18th century with the background of creation of markets and infrastructure for capital accumulation giving the capital the option for military expansion and creation of colonial power up to modern imperialism. European nationalisms based on the ideology of an ahistorical conflation of Ethnos and Demos – some in a more biologistic manner, with a concept of negative integration excluding minorities or differing identities as

the German nationalism did and some more with a model of assimilation, homogenization and centralism as the French model of nationalism and legitimation through the French Revolution.

The establishment of national statehood in the Middle East was practically prepared with the Sykes Picot treaty of 1916 – shaping the Middle East alongside British and French strategical interest. After the end of WW I in 1918 and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire alongside the Central Powers the establishment of national states in the territory of the former Ottoman Empire gained momentum.

The Ottoman Empire with its Islamic religious ideology of legitimization differed in that way from the European model and reigned in a feudal way through more or less autonomous regional elites. The European model had its impact on the region already in the 19th century through the Tanzimat reform period between 1839-1876 which tried to establish a French inspired form of centralism and led to uprisings especially in the Kurdish emirates whose autonomous privileges had been abolished.

In the beginning of the 20th century the movement of the Committees of Union and Progress C.U.P with its appeal to positivism adapted racist ideologies like Turanism. The so called Turanism, as an ideology of positivism, developed alongside the “scientific” racism transforming linguistic categories like “Aryan” or Alto-Uigurian languages into an “Uralo-Altai race” by Finnish nationalists and with their close connections to the German Reich and collaboration up to the genocide of 1.5 Million Armenians in 1914-16. This shows how close the development of Turkish nationalism is connected ethnic nationalism developing in Europe in the 19th century especially the theories of race. Especially the German imperial project Bagdad Railway has been built by deported Armenians forced to work at the project under often mortal conditions. Therefore many Ottoman death camps through were in the region of today’s Rojava. The Bagdad railway formed at least partially the border of the national states to come. We can see here that the genocides against the Armenians and Arameans are not only an outcome of ottoman policy but of the development of nationalism.

The Turkish liberation war, which lead to the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and was supported explicitly by the Kurdish, soon developed into a monistic, Turanist national state accepting no other identity than the Turkish and Sunni identity. While Ottoman Kurdistan and Persian Kurdistan were split since the battle of Caldiran in 1514, the borders between Northern Kurdistan (Turkey) and Western Kurdistan (Rojava) were drawn by the mandate powers in 1916. Today’s Syria stayed until its formal independence in 1946 under French dominion. The construction of national borders split the Kurdish population and even family ties. The ancient city of Nusaybin became on the Syrian side the city of Al Qamishli (founded 1926) Serê Kaniye became Ras Al Ayn in Syria and Ceylanpinar in Turkey (split in 1918).

Due to the block confrontation between the NATO Member Turkey and the Sowjet ally Syria the border was mined with millions of anti-personal landmines. On the Turkish side of the border the policy of a monistic national state was established and every identity beyond Turkish identity was persecuted. Kurdish and even the letters “q,w,x” which don’t exist in the Turkish alphabet were forbidden. The founding of the Turkish republic was accompanied by massacres on Kurds and Assyrians, like the massacre of Dersim where between 30.000 and 80.000 of the Kurdish Alevis were killed in 1938.

This policy of Turkisation is mirrored by the panarabistic policy in Syria and Iraq especially under the Baathist regimes. The concept of panarabistic nationalism derived, too in great parts from the monistic nationalism which developed in romantic Germany. So we can observe that

the Kurdish population in the states of Iraq, Syria and Turkey lived through a phase of oppression and assimilation policy under differing nationalisms. The reactions were manifold.

From the formation of the PKK as Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement to the paradigm of radical democracy

While the Kurdish Movements around the Barzani and Talabani clans chose the way of Kurdish Nationalism the Kurdish movement in Northern Kurdistan/Turkey, the PKK was founded in 1978 followed a Marxist Leninist path of national liberation and proletarian internationalism beyond national identity. We can see this too in the long internationalist tradition of the PKK and even some of the founders of the PKK like Haki Karer were of Turkish origin fighting as internationalists against colonialism. The PKK defined 1977 in her first program the colonialism and the feudal structure of Kurdish society as her main targets. In this program the PKK defined the Kurdish Revolution as a national and democratic revolution. While the impetus in this time lay on the national revolution which should provide the base for the democratic revolution.

The history of the PKK has to be seen in the broader context of the political struggles of national liberation and especially of the leftist students' movement of the 60ies and 70ies all around the world and it was a movement which developed in dialectic between student movement and population in Kurdistan. It formed in the world wide struggles with an anti-imperialist, socialist and leftist notion such a students' movement had formed in the Turkey of the 60ies, too. Many of the protagonists were of Kurdish origin but in the general discourse of the left of Turkey Kurdishness wasn't discussed as a factor of social mobilization. The most conflictive point reflected in the question if Kurdistan could be seen as a colony. The main course of analyze in the left of Turkey was to interpret Turkey as a colony of the imperialist west and in that sense a colony couldn't have its one colony – the Kurdish question was not only neglected it was seen by many as a danger for a socialist mobilization because they alleged that recognizing Kurdishness would divide the working class and the country and only serve imperialist interests. Inspired by the anticommunist, US- supported military coup in Chile on 11.06.1973 Turkish military seized power after conferring with US officials on the 12th of September 1980 – the coup traumatized the whole society of Turkey and managed to crush the whole huge left wing movement in Turkey. According to reports on the time of the coup more than 650.000 people were arrested, many disappeared. While revolutionary mass organizations were disbanded and gave up most of their organization structures more than 400 PKK cadres had pulled back to Syrian occupied Lebanon and started preparing their armed struggle against the junta in Turkey. In the meantime imprisoned activists and cadres of the PKK were able to mobilize society through massive actions of protest and resistance. Self-sacrifices of central cadres like Mazlum Dogan became iconic up to today. So the PKK officially started armed struggle in the Kurdish provinces of Turkey on 15th of August 1984 – becoming within ten years one of the strongest Guerilla forces worldwide with tenth of thousands fighters in its ranks. The bases of the PKK had been in that time still Baathist Syria and occupied Lebanon, using on the traditional antagonism between Syria and Turkey and the cold war with the Soviet affiliated Syria on one side and the NATO member Turkey on the other for the advantage of its liberation struggle. This brought the problem with it to organize the Kurdish population in Syria and at the same time not endanger its retreat in Syria. Therefore that time is outlined as well by diplomacy as well as repression by the Baath Regime – there were and still are

for example many political prisoners out of the PKK in Syria. As many witnesses of that time in Rojava explain, from the early 80ies on the PKK was beginning to organize the Kurdish in Syria and especially in the region of Rojava. Therefore in that region exists a high consciousness on the aims and methods of the PKK. This reflects especially in context of women's' liberation and empowerment beginning with the first contacts with the PKK in the 80ies. The struggle of the PKK was until 1993 focused on undertaking the liberation of Northern Kurdistan as a first step on the way to centralist, democratic, socialist state of Kurdistan. While the PKK always based it's theory and practice on proletarian internationalism and the project of a Kurdish state was seen as a plural, multi-identical project, the critique on the national state model in general developed with the breakdown of the state socialism in a phase when the PKK was stronger than ever before. The PKK was able to create a balance of power with the Turkish armed forces which reacted with campaigns against the civil population, destroying more than 4.000 villages – as no side was able to win that war and due to the developing critique in national statist models, the PKK declared in 1993 its first unilateral ceasefire and demanded a federal state with autonomous regions. Even before those times the PKK was critical about state socialism in the model of the Eastern bloc and interpreted the Kurdish question as a question of democratization of society. Especially due to discussions on the reason of the end of state socialism Abdullah Öcalan developed a radical critique on the state model and began to search for a solution from within civil society. Parties like HEP and DEP were founded, forming the tradition of Kurdish parties in the Turkish parliament.

In the meantime thousands of women from the villages joined the guerillas of the national liberation army of the PKK the ARGK. Women were the leaders of the uprisings in cities like Cizre and other places. This made the situation of women even more present in the view of the PKK and Öcalan.

In his critique Öcalan took up historical discourses on the origin of hierarchy and state society and comes to the point that the implementation of patriarchy had been the precondition for building up statist societies and hierarchy. We could the shift of the PKK is from defining the national question as main question to patriarchy as the main contradiction in society. With this shift he defines women as the first colony and without gender liberation no liberation in society could be accomplished.

Therefore attacking patriarchy meant to attack statism, centralism and nationalism: Autonomous women's' organizations like autonomous women's' guerilla forces were created – this concept forms the base of the structures of gender equality we can observe in today's' Rojava. The PKK is seeing the Kurdish question not only as a national or ethnic question but as a question of liberation of society. The truces of the PKK had been sabotaged up to today by a variety of forces of the Turkish state while the PKK from 1993 on always tried to establish a way of peaceful, political solution process. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union Syria opened to neoliberalism and forced Abdullah Öcalan to leave the country. This development lead to his abduction and arrest in the one-person prison on the island of Imrali in Turkey. Turkey had been at the brink of civil war – but again the majority of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan strove for a peaceful solution by declaring a ceasefire and pulling back the Guerillas out of Turkey. Turkey didn't accept that step and more than 500 Guerillas on their way out of Turkey were killed. Öcalan presented in the following years the model of democratic confederalism and autonomy as solution project for the whole Middle East.

He continued the process begun in the early 90ies of developing the concept of a system beyond nation and statecraft. Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK, went further and criticized the conflation of nation with state, and the parallel entwining of ethnos and demos. The history of the Middle East was seen as a mirror of the cruel consequences of the national state in which „culture becomes a quasi-totalitarian marker for unity“. This discussion can be seen linked to discussion on nation state – Gellner, the ultimate logic of nationalism is assimilation, expulsion and murder (‘ethnic cleansing’), processes we have been witnessing in the twentieth century and the basic underlying pattern of the nation-state, requiring, as it does, a sufficient congruence between state and culture for a viable polity.

The PKK had undertaken a deep criticism of the concept of the Nation state and the state in general. It was seen then in the context of the colonialist border policy of Sykes-Picot and Lausanne and the oppressive power and the national state was in general defined as a source of violence and oppression. The idea of the national state was connected in the writings of Abdullah Öcalan to the development of patriarchal ideology. The struggle against an androcentric society has been at least since the beginning of the nineties even more in the last years one of the central columns of the ideology and practice of the PKK. Statecraft, capitalism and nationalism are in the view of Abdullah Öcalan results of patriarchy. These are the corner points of the new concept of Democratic Confederalism developed by Abdullah Öcalan around the year 2000. Especially the antistatist paradigms and those of gender equality began to produce a huge change in Kurdish society.

Democratic Confederalism

While in the early 90ies the struggle of the Kurdish movement had its emphasis on creating liberated areas by driving out the Turkish forces militarily the actual emphasis lies in the concept of democratic confederalism and with it in the empowerment of civil society.

We can observe two main corner points of the PKK’s radical democratic project in the Middle East: Antinationalism and Antistatism. These two main critics on the national state and the representative models of democracy bring us to the question how a progressive system based on self-determination is conceptualized and being realized. To understand this we’ve got to look at the traditions which manifest in the council democratic model of the movements inspired by Abdullah Öcalan and the discourse of the PKK. We can define at least two pillars on which the model of democratic confederalism is standing – on one hand the tradition of the left which is connecting the PKK and her ideology with the discourses of liberation movements, feminist movements worldwide and on the other hand the interpretation of Mesopotamian history and the development of society in this context as a medium for emancipation. Especially in the western discourse the second point isn’t enough elaborated and the PKK’s model of confederalism is only interpreted as an libertarian eclecticism of ideas coming from Europe or the US.

Abdullah Öcalan criticizes the traditional Marxist model of historical materialism as Eurocentric because it uses the European idea of progress for defining the status of a society on the latter of stages up to communism. Abdullah Öcalan is rejecting the teleological determinism of historical materialism – he states that the outcome of the struggles between the powerful and the oppressed never were predetermined, that a free society would have been possible in every point of history and that capitalist modernity has not been unavoidable.

“The emergence of hierarchy and class rule has not been inevitable but the product of force. Hierarchy and, based on it, the formation of statehood were implemented by the use of massive force and deceit. The important forces of natural society untiringly resisted and were steadily forced pushed back their space being maximally reduced. But hierarchy and class rule were never able to access some areas. [Nevertheless,] the policy and propaganda of the ruling system has succeeded to the extent that one sees the whole society exclusively formed out of class- and state hierarchy.

Through patriarchy and accumulation state society formed – but the natural society never ceased to exist, that means it always existed as a kind of underground current which Öcalan calls Democratic Civilization standing against state civilization and he puts a democratic modernity against capitalist modernity. While Kropotkin and Bookchin speak of the Hellenic and the Roman model, posing the Athens Democracy against the centralist Roman model Öcalan proposes the model of “Natural society”, a society where individual and collective exist in equilibrium. ‘During the Neolithic period a complete communal social order, so called “primitive socialism”, was created around woman’, a social order that ‘saw none of the enforcement practices of the state order’ (Öcalan 2010: 9) When Öcalan is using the term “natural society” he is referring to a society without commodification and alienation in some ways similar to the term “*Urkommunismus*” introduced by Morgan and Engels but he’s coming to another conclusion than historical materialism. While in the Marxist model the “*Urkommunismus*” had to be overcome to be followed by other stages of society including feudal and capitalist society where the working class as an actor of emancipation emerges. While Marx himself is showing flexibility in this argumentation and states in respect on small farmer villages in Russia that the stage of industrial capitalism is not absolutely necessary for a socialist revolution because the structures of commons still survive there.

Nevertheless many traditional Marxists state that industrialization is precondition for a socialist revolution which is only possible through the working class as an agent and therefore the colonies have necessarily to be industrialized or the Middle East has to be “modernized” to create a bourgeois system. Öcalan sees the remainders of “natural society” in the collective and democratic traditions still existing in some parts of Middle Eastern especially Kurdish society. The individualization in Mesopotamia modernity hadn’t taken place in the extent of the modern capitalist societies. In that sense Öcalan’s model of Democratic Confederalism starts with the societies status quo by supporting democratic traditions, like collective identities and discarding antidemocratic concepts like patriarchy, sectarianism or feudalism.

This method is in many senses of great importance for the actual situation in Rojava or in the other parts of Kurdistan which can be defined as classical colonies without working class. It has been one factor which always strengthened the PKK, even more today. To reject the monistic national-state means for the PKK the creation of a model of administration based on difference not homogeneity. The model of Democratic Confederalism is being built up now for more than ten years in the Turkish part of Kurdistan but due to massive arrests against civil structures the development of the system in practice has been thrown back again and again. Nevertheless many cities in that region have developed a strong structure of institutions of radical democratic self-administration which have deep roots in society as the public support of 80-90% in some Kurdish cities show in elections and which are putting up a strong resistance against police and military operations of the Turkish government.

The situation for the model of democratic confederalism changed decisively when in July 2012 the Syrian army had to draw most of its forces out of the region of Northern Syria, Rojava. Due to the policy of the “third way” practiced in Rojava, neither aligning with the Syrian state nor with the Arabic and Islamist dominated opposition this process was relatively peaceful. Now the peoples’ councils in Rojava who had a close connection to the ideas of Democratic Confederalism started to come to the open and started building up a new system of council democracy. Favouring this change two factors came together, first the breakdown of state order, a situation in which people tend to assemble and organize their daily life, second strong social background supporting the idea of Democratic Confederalism Rojava can give us insights in the practical working of Democratic Confederalism and radical democratic models.

Council democratic models have a long history – and while the processes of mediation and collectivity in traditional mid-eastern societies influenced Öcalan deeply even so did the discussions and developments of council democracy in the European history. And some conclusions of Öcalan are closely linked to discussions in the worldwide left-wing movements. Theorists like Michael Hardt and Toni Negri started with publications in the first decade of the 21. Century to conceptualize a similar idea of radical democratization of society using the term of Democracy in a radical amplification on the whole of society overcoming representative systems by direct participation.

At least since the Commune de Paris council organization has been a central topic of socialist movements in Europe and Russia. Councils were the main protagonists of the revolutionary movements of the late 19th and early 20th century especially in the Russian revolution and the uprisings in Germany 1918 when workers’ and soldiers’ formed the vanguard of the socialist project. While during revolutions councils seem to play in many cases a major role they’re being neutralized in nearly all cases, in some as consequence of consolidation (Soviet Union) in some as consequence of counterrevolution (Commune of Paris, Council movement in Germany). In theory we can follow manifold discussions on council democracy, which Hannah Arendt called “the lost treasure of democracy.” Arendt sees the model of council democracy as a model how the people could participate while representative models were excluding them. According to Arendt the spontaneous formation of models of council democracy during revolutionary periods is a tool to represent the heterogeneity of society.

The commune as focal point of Democratic Confederalism

Arendt’s definition of council democracy seems to have some congruency with the model of democratic confederalism. Nevertheless Democratic Confederalism is rejecting the model of the national state as a monistic model which automatically creates a ruling elite and is hindering democracy. Through council democracy every single identity shall be represented from the local level up to the level of coordination. The smallest unit of democratic confederalism, the commune is consisting out of small number of households, between 20 and 150 which means that everybody living in the area of a commune can represent himself directly within the commune. The question of gender and identity differences is solved through autonomous structures working together, gender quota of 40% and cochairpersons, at least one male and one female, if there are other cultural, religious or ethnic identities in the region of they get a seat as speakers regardless of the size of the minority. In that way Democratic Confederalism is differing from classical mod-

els of federalism. In democratic confederalism there are elements of federalism like the cantons model as units of self-administration. But the idea of 'federalism' is still a semi-national idea creating more or less autonomous regions in which minorities could create a majority. The units of self-administration are, too big to give all singularities of the multitude the possibility of direct participation. That means that the idea of confederalism develops more into the direction of the federation of autonomous councils. The political autonomy of the commune, as well as of the singularity is a central point which is closely connected to the model of confederalism as alternative to statehood. Therefore the term Democratic Confederalism seems to unthinkable without the term of Democratic Autonomy, which means political autonomy on all levels up the confederation of councils which is defined as Democratic Nation. Autonomous grassroots communes can only exist in urban as well as in most rural areas if they solve problems through the federation with other communes – therefore quarter councils, city councils, canton councils and the peoples' council of Rojava have been introduced. These councils consist out of the cochairs of the communes or the councils on a lower stage. The interesting is that at least in theory, power should be reduced, the bigger the area of administration of council is, that way an administration without creating a state could be realized. Federalist ideas reflect in democratic confederalism in respect of guaranteed representation of minorities on all levels of administration. But it's going further and is trying to break with the concept of majority vs. minority by empowerment of regional structures and neighbourhoods. In Rojava there are three official languages – Kurdish, Arabic, Aramean. All posts of boardchairpersons which in a representative system would function like ministers have representants of all ethnic or religious identities within them. That means that the board for justice has 21 representants in place of one minister for Justice in representative systems. That shows that the search for mediation and a social consensus is valued here higher than the supposed efficiency of one minister and his deputies.

Hannah Arendt didn't accept the inclusion of the social question into the idea of self-administration, in that point she was criticized by Jürgen Habermas who claimed that she hadn't understood that the terminus of Revolution meant the emancipation of oppressed classes. In that context the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg should be discussed who stated that a socialist revolution should be undertaken by the radical democratic organization of the masses and through process of construction of self-administration and not by just changing the political actors. Luxemburgian thinking can be understood as a countercurrent of authoritarian tendencies in the socialist movements. The inclusion of economy in the model of self-administration and democratization is an obvious parallel between the Democratic Confederalism and Council-socialism. But nevertheless it is differing from the Luxemburgian model, too, as the councils are seen as institutions of the working class, representing that way the "totality" of society. Nevertheless this model at least didn't actively include women, families and unemployed. To develop a system of radical democracy out of this approach the concept had to be amplified. The idea of widening this system as a radical democratic approach for the whole society started to be developed in the 1970ies The change was dedicated to develop "politics beyond the state, political organization beyond party, and political subjectivity beyond class." Today we see a synergy of thinking which is reflected in the explicit inclusion of all questions of life in politics in the critique of Judith Butler on Hannah Arendt: "[For] Arendt it would seem, those who act from necessity act from the body, but necessity can never be a form of freedom (the two are opposites), and freedom can only be achieved by those who are, well, not hungry. But what

about the possibility that one might be hungry, angry, free, and reasoning, and that a political movement to overcome inequality in food distribution is a just and fair political movement?”

Similar concepts became more and more an alternative to the western model of liberal democracy inspiring liberation movements all around the world and having a great influence on the anti-globalist movement. The development of radical democracy in the Middle East has to be seen directly linked to the debates started by Luxemburg and Arendt. And as we demonstrated it is compatible with the critics of the PKK on historical materialism.

Economy in Democratic Confederalism – “Let’s communalize Energy, water and land – Let’s build up a free society”

Murray Bookchin defines the ideal economy as a municipalist form of moral economy under democratic control. He states that the control by the Communes over economy and over the enterprises represents the highest developed form of confederalism. These principles are being applied on the economy in Rojava. That means that at least since 2012 communes have commissions for economy which realize the task of building up communal economy. That means that with the help of communes and movements like TEV-DEM (Movement for a democratic society) or Yekitîya Star (women’s movement) cooperatives are being built up. Land that was former owned by the Syrian state is being communalized, which means that about 80% of the land are under control of the councils.

The communes are building up cooperatives which work the land, give a share to the community and work for their own subsistence. The surplus production is being sold on markets. Bookchin points out “Let me stress that when I speak of a moral economy, I’m not advocating a communitarian or cooperative economy in which small profiteers, however well-meaning their intentions may be, simply become little “self-managed” capitalists in their own right...Either municipalized enterprises controlled by citizens’ assemblies will try to take over the economy or capitalism will prevail in this sphere of life with a forcefulness which no rhetoric can diminish.”

This danger is being recognized by the self-administration in Rojava, too – therefore is it forbidden by law for a cooperative to separate itself from the council and build up a capitalist enterprise. They are always under the control of the commune which appoints the chairpersons for the cooperatives and is controlled by various economic councils and councils of workers. “We’re building up cooperatives to abolish competition and to create social equality.” Most of the cooperatives are small, like five to ten persons producing textiles, agricultural products, groceries but there are already some bigger cooperatives, too, like a cooperative near Amûde which is guaranteeing most of the subsistence of more than 2.000 households and is even able to sell on the market. The market has controlled prices for groceries; while there is a market the ideal of communal economy which is projects is meaning the exchange between councils. Cooperatives should build up federations to fulfill the needs of the population. So through economic commissions of the councils on all stages the cooperatives are connected and should at least theoretically but also already in some places practically be able to fulfill their needs for fuel, gas, flour, groceries and other products out of communal economy.

The concept of a “social economy” was developed from Democratic Confederalism’s form of socialism, as distinguished from both neoliberalism and state socialism. “Historically, the economy developed separately from society,” observed Dr. Dara Kurdaxi, a member of the economics

commission in Afrîn. “That led to the establishment of exploitative states and finally economic liberalism. In contrast, state socialism, which diverged from its own economic ideas, made the economy part of the state and turned everything over to the state. But [state capitalism] is clearly not so different from multinational firms, trusts, and corporations. ... Historical experience has shown that we in Rojava must follow a different model.”

The production should not be reined neither by state nor by market but through the communes and the councils which are as institutions of self-representation in the position to know the needs of the participants. But cooperatives exist in all sectors of society even the refining sector. In that sense an advantage for this process is that Rojava had been treated by the Syrian state as classical colony. Resources were extracted but nearly no production took place. Even though an industrialization around ecological and communalist principles to fulfill the demands of the people of Rojava is being planned but due to the situation of war and the economic embargo it hadn't been realized yet. David Graeber describes the economy of Rojava in three layers, international economy, which is connected to the capital markets and virtually doesn't exist through embargo in the moment, market economy with by the councils controlled prices and communal economy between the councils.

“Capitalism foregrounds exchange value, the production of things for the market. It rests entirely on the profit motive; production is not for the society but for the market. But a society that cannot determine its economic activities is helpless even to improve the lot of its own workforce. We are forced to work for pathetic wages, for miniscule compensation, but we do it anyway. We work in the informal sector without job security, without unionization, but we work regardless.... An economic self-government is crucial for Democratic Autonomy; indeed, it is the precondition for Democratic Autonomy. A region that can't decide on its own economy cannot be autonomous.”

In that way the economic model of Rojava is being seen as a reply to the neoliberalism of capitalist modernity and a consequence on the critical discussion of statist socialism. In the way of building up communal economy the focus on exchange value shall be shifted to the use value of products. This shift of mentality has according to Öcalan the potential to solve the problems of unemployment which is defined as a problem produced by the capitalist system. There are endless activities with high use values which can't be quantified in exchange values and are therefore today not seen as productive work:

“A democratic-ecological society, with gender liberation and a moral that isn't centered on the state. That this is an utopia doesn't mean that we can't live nothing of it here and now.... To expect democracy and socialism from the state is the negation of democracy and socialism ... In non-statist Democracies the people and communities have to organize their self-defense. Peoples' defense militias have to be able to protect the values of peoples' democracy and all values that have to protected, in the villages, cities, mountains and deserts from robbers, thieves and oppressors.

It is on the economic sector possible to create communes, cooperatives and various associations and an economy which isn't based on commodification and production and isn't hazardous for people and environment. Unemployment is a structural problem of systems of exploitation can't is a problem in a democratic-ecological society. The creation of a society in which is creative education and passion for life can be seen as the best way to socialism. “

Conclusion

From the negative experience drawn from the consequences of the model of the national state the PKK and especially its chairman Abdullah Öcalan created an alternative model of confederalism which has no spatial or political borders. The model is a model of social revolution and political evolution – that means starting a process of building up a self-administered society with the citizens, empowering and changing their understanding of citizenship and building that way up a confederation with all its necessary structures, from defense to economy. A de facto change happens while violence is only used as a means of self-defense and has no strategical value in itself. As well as it is with the model of self-defense all other parts of Democratic Confederal institutions are based on coexistence, not on taking the power. It's not about challenging one national state but the model of statehood in general – this gives democratic confederalism its revolutionary power which can be observed in today's Rojava Northern Syria as well as in the Kurdish regions of Turkey and might offer a solution for many of the conflicts along all kind of identities in the Middle East and beyond.

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