

The New-Old PKK

“democratic confederalism”, “women’s liberation ideology”, “Kurdish freedom”, “paradigm-shift”

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The PKK has continued to struggle for justice in Kurdistan. But its democratic transformation leaves much to be desired.

Before the late 2014 battle for Kobanê, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was an almost forgotten force in the West. But with the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party's (PYD) — a sister organization to the PKK — heroic struggle against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, it was clear that the party and its imprisoned founder, Abdullah Öcalan, could not be ignored. And not just in left circles.

The last time the PKK attracted widespread interest was during the 1990s when it fought a brutal war with the Turkish state for Kurdish self-determination. At that time, the PKK's ideological references were thoroughly Marxist-Leninist. Support for the organization on the Left was strongest among groups that placed their emphasis on national liberation struggles in the Third World.

Libertarian socialist and anti-Stalinist currents were more skeptical. They pointed to the party's nationalist orientation and its antidemocratic character, demonstrated by Öcalan's lethal purges. PKK violence against civilians — like the families of pro-government militia members or government-employed teachers — was also a major point of contention.

But times have changed — and so, apparently, has the PKK.

From Lenin to Bookchin

Among admirers of the “new PKK” — particularly anarchists and libertarian socialists — there is a common narrative of the PKK's transformation. The PKK was a Stalinist party leading a guerrilla war in the 1980s and '90s, and while it enjoyed genuine support among the oppressed Kurdish minority in Turkey who saw it as their champion, its goal of national self-determination was insufficient for winning liberation.

What's more, the PKK was flawed in ways that prevented it from becoming a genuinely emancipatory force: it was vanguardist, had an authoritarian structure, and equated the conquest of state power with liberation. Hamstrung by such defects, the PKK's struggle stagnated in the late nineties, before Öcalan's ultimate arrest by Turkish authorities in 1999.

But once in prison, the narrative continues, Öcalan was forced to confront the failures of Marxism, Leninism, and the original PKK project. He started to read widely beyond the Marxist-Leninist canon, fundamentally rethought his vision of liberation, and formulated a drastically new worldview to overcome his party's shortcomings.

The name most commonly cited as a decisive influence on Öcalan in this endeavor is Murray Bookchin¹, a libertarian socialist living in the United States. Bookchin had been a Marxist, but he eventually developed his own theory of social change that identified the tension between capital accumulation — with its imperative for eternal growth — and the environment as the central capitalist contradiction. According to Bookchin, the struggle to save the ecosystem has an inherently anticapitalist dynamic and can unite the world's exploited and alienated.

Bookchin's post-capitalist vision was a radically downsized society, organized around autonomous, ecologically sustainable municipalities. These municipalities — called communes —

¹ www.versobooks.com

would replace large cities, which he believed to be a threat to the environment and a hindrance to direct democracy.

To bring about this society, Bookchin favored a combination of political action and prefigurative organizing — the creation in the here and now of structures such as cooperatives and democratic associations that could foreshadow a better society. Political action and these experiments would, Bookchin argued, begin to empower ordinary people in their communities.

It was compelling enough to win over Öcalan, who, in the popular narrative, made a balance sheet of the PKK's failures and decided to reorient his goals to a similar kind of libertarian socialism called "democratic confederalism."

Öcalan's lawyers then shared his ideas with the PKK, who embraced it and radically reformed the organization's theory and practice. Today — the story concludes — the PKK is the ideological center of a much wider liberation struggle, a kind of think tank dedicated to spreading Öcalan's libertarian-socialist vision throughout the larger Kurdish movement. Armed seizure of the state has been replaced as a goal with a focus on building prefigurative structures in civil society.

Back to the Future

This tale — of an imprisoned revolutionary who makes a sober assessment of past experiences and is unafraid to make real changes while remaining true to the goal of human emancipation — has a certain romantic appeal. The PKK's supposed move from a dogmatic "Marxism-Leninism" to libertarian socialism also resonates with the wider view that twentieth-century socialism failed because of misplaced trust in the state and the party.

However, there is another possible interpretation of the PKK's evolution — one that stresses continuities rather than ruptures. In this view, today's "democratic confederalism," while certainly a departure from the "old" PKK, isn't the break it has been made out to be.

Consider the PKK's conception of women's liberation — a central element in the PKK's current vision of social change. Concern for women's liberation is often associated with Öcalan's "libertarian-socialist turn" but it actually precedes it.

Women's struggles came to the forefront in the 1990s as the PKK expanded from being a guerrilla to a mass movement. The PKK's expansion increased its influence in a wide range of social and cultural organizations and as a result more women joined. Already in the nineties, one third of the PKK's guerrillas were women.

In 1994, the Free Women's Movement of Kurdistan (later renamed the Free Women's Union of Kurdistan, YAJLK) was established and the PKK also began forming women-only units — partly because many male guerrillas refused to take orders from female commanders. Others hoped that women-only units would help break up internalized notions of female obedience and servility. Today, a mandatory gender quota is in place in gender-mixed PKK groups; 40 percent of leadership must be women while executive posts are split between one man and one woman.

Women in the PKK credit Öcalan with these policies. As one female activist put it,

"[W]e were very far from our own history and were always subjected to repression. That is why the movement needed a leader. We were buried and cemented in, and did not get through. Chair Apo [Öcalan's nickname] was the only one who broke through. He was the flower that broke through the asphalt. He gave us hope ... [C]hair Apo showed us our personal freedom as women."

Öcalan's concept² of women's liberation is shaped by myths of a Neolithic matriarchal past that was purportedly displaced by the rise of class society and the formation of the first states. According to Öcalan, this oppression is rooted in patriarchal attitudes, transferred from generation to generation, and internalized by women. He argues that these views are transmitted through the family — especially through notions of male honor and control over women's bodies — and that liberation means unlearning them.

Öcalan's ideas about Kurdish national liberation overlap with those on women's liberation and also feature a return to an idealized, ancient past. In this Neolithic past, women were not only free but the Kurds as a whole were an egalitarian, freedom-loving people. With the rise of states and organized religion the Kurds became alienated from their own proper identity, and what Öcalan calls "the Kurdish mentality" was distorted. Today's problems are all traced back to this original fall from grace.

The PKK in the 1990s also often referenced Kurdish history, as when Öcalan claimed that defending their "thousands of years old fatherland" was the highest honor and duty of all Kurds. The PKK back then was strongly nationalist. Öcalan claimed that a "conception of humanity" not founded on patriotism was a "rotten crime."

More recently Öcalan has criticized ahistorical notions of nations and states and he has declared that they are social constructs. However, what has remained constant is the idea that the PKK's struggle is one for the expression of an "authentic Kurdish identity." Where before this goal was framed in terms of national self-determination and state-building, today it is presented as a renaissance of a utopian Neolithic past.

Despite the changing discourse, Öcalan still insists on the existence of a transhistorical Kurdish identity. In 2011 he wrote, "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."

Öcalan's essentialist view of identities — whether he is talking about Kurds or women — has passed through his "turn" with little change. For the PKK, "women" are the social subject that stands at the center of emancipation, playing a similar role to the proletariat in classical Marxism — the universally oppressed subject whose emancipation entails universal emancipation. According to Öcalan the "role which once was allotted to the working class, today falls to women."

But the category of women itself is never interrogated. According to Öcalan, women are biologically more compassionate and empathic than men and have more "emotional intelligence." Womanhood is associated with motherhood — women "possess life itself" and thus are supposedly closer to nature than men.

This leads to seeing women as a homogeneous category with a singular ideology corresponding to its liberation struggle. The PKK's women's party — Party of Free Women (PJA) — declared that "the women's liberation ideology is an alternative for all previous world-views, whether right-wing or left-wing."

The arrest of Öcalan in 1999³ inaugurated a period of turmoil for the PKK. Many supporters and members of the PKK were shocked by the statements Öcalan made after his capture. In court, he declared:

² ocalan-books.com

³ www.washingtonpost.com

“I want to continue my life committed to two promises; I want to serve the full realization of democracy, peace and fraternity. I believe that the intentions of the [Turkish] state are similar. In addition I want to see that the PKK stops the armed struggle and I want to dedicate myself to this goal. I want a PKK that is not against the state and which assumes a legal status.”

Öcalan denied that the PKK wanted to break up Turkey and insisted that Kurds would be able to live in freedom inside a reformed Turkish republic. He blamed the war on the “triumvirate of Agas, Sheiks, and Asirets” — pre-modern forces that had supposedly divided the Kurds and the Turkish state — instead of on the national oppression of the Kurds.

Öcalan’s statements in the Turkish courtroom contradicted the program and founding documents of the PKK. In the past, the PKK denounced the push for Kurdish autonomy, rather than independence, as a betrayal.

But beginning in the early nineties, Öcalan talked increasingly about “a free Kurdistan,” and suggested that Kurdish autonomy inside Turkey on the basis of “full equality,” rather than a Kurdish nation-state, was possible.

“Freedom” came to mean the cultivation of the “true Kurdish identity” and the ability to express this identity. After his capture, Öcalan made this change in the goal of the PKK explicit in a way he had not done before. He declared: “the Kurdish question can be considered in essence a question of freedom of speech and culture.” Thousands left the movement in disappointment and those who refused to follow the new line were attacked as traitors and enemy agents.

While in prison Öcalan reworked the idea of “Kurdish freedom” to mean the goal of “democratic confederalism.” Borrowing from Bookchin, Öcalan now says he rejects the idea of taking over or overthrowing the state to achieve his goal and argues that emancipatory movements should avoid seeking state power and focus on achieving liberation through civil society — not smashing the state, but making it superfluous in the process. Once people realize that they “don’t need the state,” it will slowly wither away.

Öcalan certainly changed his stated views after his capture, but there was not such a clean break as the popular narrative suggests. Already before his capture, Öcalan had started to abandon concepts associated with the Marxist-Leninist PKK. In the 1980s, the PKK declared that its goal was an “independent, socialist Kurdistan,” basing its conception of socialism loosely on the examples of the Soviet Union and China. But the party redefined its vision of socialism over the course of the next decade.

Already in 1993, Öcalan claimed that the PKK, when it discussed “scientific socialism,” did not refer to Marxism but to its own peculiar socialism that “exceeds the interests of states, the nation, and classes.” The PKK’s new socialism wasn’t even a socioeconomic system; instead it was the name for the creation of a “new man” — selfless, courageous, and patriotic — created through struggle.

Social and economic emancipation, already overshadowed by national liberation, thus faded further into the background. In his current writings, Öcalan rarely discusses social and economic issues, declaring that “questions of an alternative economic, class, and social structure are not particularly meaningful.” His vision of a socialist society is limited to a robust welfare state with work, health care, and education for everybody.

In a 1996 interview, Öcalan named Germany as an example of his kind of socialism.

No Savior From on High

The PKK did not jettison its old program or embrace its new goals and self-conception through a collective process of deliberation. Instead, party leaders simply carried out the directives of Öcalan.

In the 1980s, Öcalan became the undisputed leader of the PKK. The PKK had congresses where its program was decided but Öcalan stood above such mechanisms. He built an organization in which cadres rose to leadership positions by demonstrating their loyalty to him.

In the PKK, following Öcalan became synonymous with dedication to the cause of Kurdish liberation. Those who refused to accept this were purged. Other party leaders owed their legitimacy to Öcalan's approval, and without it they would have lost their position. Even in prison his power remains undiluted.

Just like its sister organizations in Syria, Iran, and Iraq, the PKK is a member of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK). Inside the KCK, the PKK is responsible for the "ideological front," its task defined as being "responsible for implementing the ideology and philosophy of the chairperson"; "every KCK-member should take the ideological and ethical values of the PKK as their basis."

The Kurdish struggle has attracted attention for good reason, and the dedication of its militants in the worst of conditions should not be in doubt. But the much-lauded transformation of the PKK leaves much to be desired. It's not the clear example of a transition from authoritarian Leninism to libertarian socialism it is often made out to be.

Before and after Öcalan's capture — before and after what the PKK calls the "paradigm-shift" — one essential element of the party remained unchanged: Öcalan is "the leadership" (*önderlik*). But liberation cannot come from following the twists and turns of a single leader; liberation needs a collective struggle on the back on mass organizations that foreshadow the radical democracy we wish to see in the world.

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P.S.

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