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From Germany to Bakur

European Anarchists on the Kurdish Struggle

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forces in Syria. In defending Kobanê, the YPG/YPJ based their defense on this same consciousness. Nobody could believe that they would free their city; it goes beyond rationalism. It's more about faith in yourself and belief in your revolutionary energy, which evolves out of your desire to live. That is the thing that has been nearly beaten out of you if you've been raised in Western capitalism.

Another friend added that if you really want to create a new society based in non-oppressive relationships, you're trying to build something that doesn't exist yet. It forms part of a new world, another world. How could you possibly understand it rationally from your point of view today? It's not in the books. You need to get crazy to overcome the status quo; you need to be convinced by your fantasy and your desire. That's your problem in Europe, he concluded: you forgot how to do that.

to understand if you didn't feel it yourself. But their energy was backed by a long line of friends, historically experienced oppression, mutual protection—a love for life and a belief in themselves.

All these things come first, he said, when you're sitting next to your friends in your guard position and raising your arms in defense: your trust in your comrades, your gratitude for those who believe in a free society living in the valleys, for the ones who cultivate the gardens feeding you, your sadness about the horrors the state did to your friends and families. And in the end, there's the bullet you shoot at the ones stumbling in your direction. How could they possibly win, he asked, smiling.

Even the fighter who is objectively weakest can summon great strength, if she's fighting for her own sake and for those her heart belongs to, without being pushed into a direction or ideology or being pressed to do something she doesn't want to. Those who fight for their society and the symbiotic relationships that have protected and nourished them will always defeat conventional methods based in mere destruction, hegemonic interests and strategies based on hostility. It reminded me of the words some philosophical friends from the West once said: connecting reality to your own desires has revolutionary meaning. If you really know what you're fighting for, if you see the essentials of the situation you're in, you can link it to your will to live, which will give you a beauty even beyond death. This guerrilla told me that they understand themselves as life guards, using their own abilities to protect the life of their society. It impressed me a lot.

It also poses the question: where will the revolutionary energy for the West come from? We hardly understand our own situation, pressed into pragmatic decisions based on a complex system of dependencies. Maybe this is the lesson we have to learn for ourselves: what is the truth of our common situation that we have to understand to begin? This is the same reason why no other army right now can push back the IS

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military powers. But as we’ve learned from many revolutions, war is not simply a matter of mathematics. It’s more linked to a certain way of fighting, and a matter of consciousness. We should learn from that.

Can you explain what you mean by this “way of fighting,” or specific kind of consciousness in armed struggle, that makes the Kurdish resistance distinctive?

Let me share a story that a friend once told me. He took part in the Qandil war in 2011. At that time, there was a pragmatic alliance between Turkey and Iran: both had a problem with the Kurdish movement, and were afraid of the military opportunities the guerrillas had. Qandil forms the southern end of the Mediya Defense Territories, the guerrilla-controlled mountains in the border regions of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. He told me about a situation when one and a half thousand pasdaran, the Iran infantry regiments, tried to storm the hill where the guerrillas were hiding. There were only about thirty comrades defending their mountain. He explained that what the Iranian army tried to use against them were just their bullets, and their fear of punishment from their leaders. They ran blindly upwards, and were defeated. They had no conviction, no energy, no friendship between them. On the other hand, when his comrades defended their position, they didn’t just use their weapons, he told me. They were fighting for their looted villages, for their split families, with their fallen friends in mind, with the consciousness that the attacking army would burn the mountains and forests behind them and destroy the nature in their lands. They fought for those who were too weak to stand alone, for all the parts of society who stood behind them and had their back. Maybe it’s hard

it's hard to bring that question into focus, because the whole region is burning and caught up in war. That's why the second pillar is self-defense by any means necessary. Both are crucial, and must be applied on different levels. Revolutionary uprisings across history in Europe and elsewhere that neglected one pillar or the other were inevitably defeated.

It's really important to strengthen the revolutionary position in Kurdistan, not only militarily, but also by building communication with comrades all over the world. As the revolutionary upheaval in Turkey expands and support from within the West grows, there is less opportunity for other regional powers to attack the Kurdish movement. Moreover, we should recognize the huge potential that the experience of this movement offers us to enlarge our own perspective. They organized within a situation that has been more desperate than ours from the beginning, and nevertheless they've succeeded. I'd say it is a certain way of dealing with a concrete danger that made them that strong. Also, it would be quite productive to exchange experiences. In specific questions of self-organization, the methods and tools of anarchist movements in the West are quite creative and could offer a lot of support.

Right now in the Middle East, we have the strange situation of a relative power balance, with Rojava positioned within the eye of the storm. There is the grand vision of political Sunni Islam, pushed forward by the governments of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, primarily. Then there are the Shia states of Iran, Iraq, and the remnants of the Assad regime in Syria. There is also NATO, of which Turkey is a member, though it also asserts its own interests. In the middle we also have the Islamic State (IS), a zombie army that cannot be controlled by anyone anymore, even though it was probably created and supported to crush Kurdish resistance and the regime in Damascus. So in this chaotic situation, Rojava is still necessary for NATO, for example, as the only local reliable option that has been able to defeat IS. So, yeah, Rojava is kind of caught between all these

Since their successful defense of Kobanê against the Islamic State a year ago, the Kurdish resistance movement has captured international media attention. Meanwhile, their experiments in forming a stateless society in the autonomous cantons of Rojava have fascinated anarchists across the world. But in order to understand the Kurdish resistance in Rojava (western Kurdistan), we need to take a broader look at struggles for freedom and autonomy across the region. We interviewed two members of a network of internationalist anarchists in Germany who have spent time in Bakur (northern Kurdistan), learning from the struggles taking place there. Beginning with a historical overview of the emergence of the Kurdish movement and the PKK's "new paradigm" of the last decade, they describe how their experiences in Kurdistan have reframed their understanding of anarchist struggles elsewhere across the globe.

In our feature “Understanding the Kurdish Resistance” and episodes 36 and 39 of the Ex-Worker podcast, our discussion of the Kurdish struggle for freedom and autonomy focused on Rojava (western Kurdistan). But important struggles are taking place in other parts of Kurdistan as well, some of which haven’t received as much attention. Could you provide some historical context for the emergence of the Kurdish movement, and describe the struggles unfolding today in Bakur (northern Kurdistan)?

Well, the story begins with people sitting around a campfire in Upper Mesopotamia long, long ago. Around 4300 years ago, a new social structure began evolving in the Middle East, a highly aggressive form of social organization that attacked the old communitarian structures: the Sumerian priest state. The historical process that led to the revolution in Rojava can’t be understood without recognizing the long tradition of resistance and uprisings in the Kurdish regions across the Zagros and Tauros mountain chains. It’s the area that was probably first targeted for colonization by the evolving state system, whose roots lay in Lower Mesopotamia, today’s northern Iraq, and which was also the predecessor of today’s Western state system. The PKK and the Kurdish movement today understand themselves within this long tradition of anti-governmental resistance, counting themselves as the 29th Kurdish uprising in history. The Kurdish regions always lay on the edge of strong empires, and have faced attacks by basically every imperial

In the face of this violence, the movement has developed a model called the theory of legitimate self-defense, or the theory of the rose. It’s a metaphor based on the idea that every living being has to defend its own beauty as it struggles to survive. All beings must create methods of self-defense according to their own way of living, growing, and connecting with others, in which one does not aim to destroy one’s enemy, but to force it to change its intention to attack. Guerrilla fighters discuss this as a defensive strategy in a military sense, but it also works on other scales. In essence, we can understand it as a method of self-empowerment. For a long time, the PKK guerrillas didn’t do anything, granted that the Turkish state continued negotiations, because they knew they couldn’t defeat them militarily. If you’re strong enough and follow your way, there will be no need for violence; it becomes simply a matter of organization. This understanding of self-defense is also part of the new paradigm.

Given the complex geopolitical context of the Kurdish struggle, caught between various hostile states and armed forces, what do you think it will take for a genuinely anti-authoritarian revolution to take hold and last in the region?

Well, as we’ve learned from studying other revolutions across history: the only opportunity for a revolution to last is for it to spread, to widen its horizons and to overcome all the borders established to contain it. As our Kurdish comrades explain, there are two pillars to revolutionary struggle. The first and most important one is the process of building democratic autonomy; it comes down to the simple question of how we want to live, of how to organize our daily lives. Right now,

Can you give us an update on the recent wave of state and grassroots anti-Kurdish repression going on in Turkey? How is the Kurdish movement responding to this violence?

Right now we are in a situation of escalation. In response to his party's heavy electoral defeat in the parliamentary elections of June 7, Turkish President Erdogan has declared war on the Kurdish population and therefore terminated the peace process initiated by Öcalan in 2013. Since the massacre in the border city of Suruç, which cost the lives of 34 young Kurdish and Turkish radicals on their way to Kobanê at the end of July, there have been thousands of arrests and bombardments of PKK guerrilla camps both in Bakur (northern Kurdistan/southeastern Turkey) and in the Medya Defense Territories in Bashur (southern Kurdistan/northern Iraq). While pogrom-like attacks against Kurds and other social movements have been taking place in northern Kurdistan and all over Turkey for weeks, the military conflict is escalating, with many militants and civilians shot by the state. Most recently, the Turkish army besieged the city of Cizre for a week, while Turkish ultranationalists attacked Kurds and offices of the HDP (a Kurdish political party) all over the country. Many Kurdish shops were burned down by supporters of the AKP, Erdogan's conservative Justice and Development Party, as well as by members of fascist organizations like the Gray Wolves, the youth organization of the fascist Nationalist Movement Party. Similar attacks on Kurds and other opponents of the war have taken place in Europe in recent days, and while the German state keeps quiet about these attacks by Turkish nationalists, Kurdish militants have been criminalized and arrested.

structure that emerged in the region since a few thousand years ago. Because of the mountainous terrain and the Kurds' decentralized social organization in village confederations, these regions were never fully conquered and assimilated. As a result, for thousands of years they have faced efforts by outside powers to push into their territory, and to co-opt feudal Kurdish elites in order to secure obedience and to prevent (or at least isolate) rebellion.

If we fast-forward to the 20th century, we see these dynamics still at play as the modern regional nation-state system emerges. The Turkish state was founded in 1923 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the Kurdish territories in the east but had granted them cultural and even political autonomy. During World War I, the Ottomans allied with the Central Powers, forging particular political and ideological links with Germany that continue to this day. After the defeat of the Central Powers and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish nationalist groups fought for their own state. From its founding, the ideology of the new state was ultra-nationalist. They proclaimed Turkey a state for all Turkish people, and defined all people living within its borders as part of the great Turkish nation, linking their state to the idea of ethnic superiority. As a result, any people that claimed a different ethnic or national identity, whether Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, or others, were treated like traitors and separatist terrorists. Until the 1990s, Kurdish and other non-Turkish languages were officially forbidden in Turkey—not just for affairs of state, but even in private use.

We're talking about all this history because it's important to understand the harshness of the conditions in which the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK), the Worker's Party of Kurdistan, was founded. The contemporary Kurdish movement emerged during the youth revolt of 1968 in Turkey, where a revolutionary ferment was growing among socialist organizations, radical students, workers, and peasants. In

the 1970s, a group of Kurdish and Turkish friends around Abdullah Öcalan, Kemal Pir, Haki Karer, and others gathered in Ankara and began discussing the Kurdish question from a revolutionary perspective. One of their central ideas was that Kurdistan was an internal colony, and needed to be freed from colonial oppression to establish a socialist utopia. So the PKK was founded in 1978, and began to organize according to the tenets of classical Marxist-Leninist theory. Under “the old paradigm,” as they call it today, the PKK aimed to organize a political vanguard and start a revolutionary war to free the Kurdish territories and establish a Kurdish state, which would then be used to establish socialism.

In the intensely oppressive climate of Turkey in the 1970s, many were desperate to fight for another life, and the strategy and conviction of the PKK spread rapidly. In 1984, they started a guerrilla struggle that escalated into a brutal civil war. The guerrilla movement drew considerable support from society, and in many regions could not be separated from the broader population. In response, the Turkish army, military police, and secret service started campaigns of retaliation to defeat the rebels and intimidate the population. Under the auspices of the NATO-sponsored “Gladio” anti-communist program, they destroyed some 4000 villages and killed more than 40,000 people.

In the wake of this bloodshed, the Kurdish liberation movement began a process of reflection and self-criticism in the early 1990s. In addition to facing brutal state and paramilitary repression, the guerrilla movement was racked with internal problems, with some PKK leaders acting in the manner of feudal warlords with a militaristic logic of blood revenge. It had become clear that a merely military struggle wouldn’t resolve anything. The old paradigm had led to unrelenting war and hostility, and could neither address social problems within Kurdish territories nor defend them effectively from external threats. The PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire in 1993, halting the civil war to create space for the movement to formulate a dif-

After the attack on Shengal and the siege of Kobanê last year, attention rose immediately, and the whole radical scene of Germany woke up. Since then, something has begun slowly shifting as more and more people are trying to find their way down to Rojava and some are joining the ranks of the YPG/YPJ.

What suggestions would you make to anarchists in North America and elsewhere about how to learn from and show solidarity with the Kurdish struggle for liberation?

We think anarchists should understand the Kurdish liberation struggle as their own, as an internationalist struggle. Appreciating the comrades in Kurdistan can help us overcome the liberal illusions we’ve been discussing. There must be a recognition, a consciousness, of responsibility for the dilemma of the Middle East. Open-mindedness and willingness to engage philosophically and theoretically with the ideology of the movement is important, so that we can express possibilities in many languages and colors. This requires that we support the struggle in questions of communication, too, which can be one part of several ways to support the struggle technically. Furthermore, there has always been a warm invitation to actually go to Kurdistan to learn, criticize, and refine ideas about local and international organization. And as our Kurdish friends have emphasized repeatedly, it’s ultimately up to those of us living in the Western metropolises to build up our own revolutionary movements—that’s the greatest help we could give them, for it is an opportunity for mutual defense. Also, as far as we’ve heard, practical help is needed in several subjects: knowledge about engineering, medical stuff, and all sorts of practical things can be helpful.

of PKK and fought as an internationalist. There were several German militants who joined the armed Kurdish struggle, and so there are some older comrades who can share their experiences and reflect on the mistakes that were made in those days. In the '90s there were also a lot of problems between the German left and the Kurdish movement, coming from both sides. On the one hand, the PKK was still entrenched in the old paradigm and focused strongly on the struggle in Kurdistan to the exclusion of everything else, which made it hard to establish a real relationship of friendship. On the other hand, Germans maintained our classic patterns of distance-keeping, criticizing without understanding, and the arrogance of the metropole. When Öcalan was arrested and the movement struggled hard to survive, this tenuous solidarity fractured.

Fortunately, as the new paradigm first began to emerge, a new process of learning began, although for a long time it moved quite slowly and tentatively. German comrades again visited Kurdistan and got in contact with organizations in diaspora, while others again joined the guerrilla struggle. The PKK understands itself as internationalist, and it is of great value for all sides when international ties are strengthened. It was always hard to organize together with the Kurdish communities in diaspora, and honestly, it remains a big problem to this day. Although there are quite a lot of Kurdish people living in Europe, the connections between them and other European radicals are not very strong. That has different reasons: one of them is the fact that German society is quite racist, and a lot of migrant communities are organizing just among their own people as a kind of self-defense mechanism. Also, nationalism tends to be stronger among Kurds in diaspora, and the society in diaspora is often still organized along feudal lines. But in the 1990s, there were common demonstrations, and today German and Kurdish groups are once again marching together. But on a level of common self-organization, we are still weak.

ferent paradigm for social transformation. The Kurdish movement faced many setbacks and challenges during this process of reflection—repeated efforts from the Turkish state to provoke new outbreaks of civil war, the kidnapping and imprisonment of PKK chairman Abdullah Öcalan, and the ascent of more old-fashioned feudal-style Kurdish parties such as the Barzani Clan in Northern Iraq. Yet despite these challenges, between 1993 and 2005, the Kurdish movement developed what they now call “the new paradigm,” which would profoundly shift the goals and strategies of the Kurdish movement.

One major push towards this process of internal change came from the Kurdish women's movement. Thousands of women had joined the guerrilla forces during the civil war. Often, they found themselves in conflict with old-fashioned commanders who attempted to hold them in traditional gender roles and did not treat them equally. In response, they established completely autonomous female guerrilla groups, which was quite a revolutionary act in their cultural context. They reclaimed for themselves the right to fight in battle and organized on their own, as part of the movement but making their own decisions autonomously. As our friends have told us, there was also a difference in their way of fighting: in male or mixed-gender units, competitive behavior persisted, a heritage from many generations of hierarchical society that remains a problem to this day. Dynamics among the female fighters were less competitive; we can see evidence for this in the numbers of fallen fighters. Most casualties took place when heading back from an action, when attitudes of cockiness and pride over victory among the male fighters were quite common. By contrast, in the women's units, awareness tended to be more long-range, and their fighters proved less vulnerable to this potentially fatal overconfidence.

In addition to autonomous military units, Kurdish women also formed social and political committees to discuss the problem of patriarchal oppression. Today, the head of the women's

movement is the Komalen Jinen Kurdistan (KJK), the Confederation of Women in Kurdistan, which is part of the KCK, the general confederation, but makes decisions autonomously. Also, the women's movement maintains veto power over decisions made by men's groups or general assemblies. Under their influence, the Kurdish movement has challenged long-standing patriarchal and hierarchical patterns in their models of organizing.

The process of shifting towards a new paradigm was also pushed by an ideological wing within the PKK around their chairman Abdullah Öcalan, who formulated the idea of democratic confederalism after undertaking a deep historical analysis of the hierarchical system of Middle East and beyond. He stressed that the problems of power, oppression, and violence emerged from the historical process of civilization itself, beginning with the ancient Sumerian priest states, which had posed the initial challenge to the more egalitarian and often matricentric forms of social organization that had preceded them. The problems of oppression, warfare, and the quest for power are linked to the institutionalization of patriarchal relationships in state structures and the priesthood. The capitalist system, the nation-state, and industrialism are concepts that evolved out of these hierarchical and male-dominated modes of thought. Öcalan also drew on the ideas of American anarchist Murray Bookchin for his analysis of the utopian potential of democratic confederalism, and stressed the importance of embracing a new ecological, democratic, and gender-liberated paradigm. Central to his conception of the "new paradigm" of the PKK was the idea of communalism, that each part of society should organize itself and come together in a decentralized, communitarian confederation.

Inspired by this new paradigm, the Komalen Ciwaken Kurdistan (KCK), the Confederation of the Societies of Kurdistan, was founded in 2005. At its core is a system of councils in neighborhoods, villages, and cities, serving as a potent civil counter-

of youth, of always moving forward while questioning. Don't be afraid of self-development; be open to criticism and learn from your and others' mistakes. Let the process of revolutionary change start with yourself. Maybe that's also quite a good thing for European anarchists to remember: the revolutionary process is never something outside of you; it has to be identical with your own progress towards freedom, for you become a symbiotic part of a free society. I think every militant anarchist should accept our historical responsibility and the possibility of gathering our collective power and agency to build and defend a society based on creativity, diversity, and autonomy. But this means we have to live the way we think and speak. So let's sweep our liberal ideas into the dustbin of history. Only then will we be able to move beyond common theoretical agreement and be able "to change everything," as you say!

The connection between anarchists or the radical left and the Kurdish liberation struggle seems to be strong in Germany, with many anarchists active in solidarity efforts and taking great inspiration from Rojava and elsewhere in Kurdistan. Can you talk about the history of these ties of solidarity? What are some of the concrete forms that solidarity has taken?

At first, groups of solidarity emerged from the squatting movement in Germany. Since the 1990s there were also German comrades who joined the guerrilla struggle. Some of them died in the war, like Shehid Ronahi (Andrea Wolf). She had to disappear because she was persecuted by the German state for actions of the Red Army Fraction, so she joined the ranks

lective freedom. As a counterexample to the liberal “freedom” of Western anarchist and radical left scenes, it’s worth mentioning that the Kurdish youth movement is really strictly fighting against drug dealing and abuse, because the Turkish state is clearly trying to destroy the movement not only with tear gas and arrests but with all available means of modern counter-insurgency, including support for drug dealing and prostitution. We think there must be a collective reflection on how consumerism, individualism, and other forms of liberalism function as a form of counter-insurgency and how much we have internalized them into our mentality and behavior. We need to organize self-defense against the attacks of these capitalist ideologies that reduce us to nothing more than consumers and self-owning entrepreneur/workers.

In contrast to these liberal illusions, our experiences with comrades in the Kurdish movement have given us perspective on the importance of solving this Western polarization between individual and society, focusing on collective values and ethics rather than political and identitarian viewpoints. Inspired by the example of the Kurdish movement, I think we should study and reclaim our history as part of the process of developing the self-awareness we need to solve the Western dilemma we’re confronted with. Through criticism of civilization and analysis of our communal and democratic heritage, we can develop historical consciousness and confidence in what we’re doing. Abdullah Öcalan tried in his prison writings to delve into the historical background of the Kurdish struggle quite deeply, so as to have the opportunity to compare it to earlier experiences of revolutionary struggles. Many in the PKK today draw on this history to critically reflect on their ideology and strategies, weaving it into the process of self-questioning and the creation of their own philosophy of liberation—a revolutionary mythology, perhaps.

And at the same time, this doesn’t mean getting caught in nostalgia. Instead, take inspiration from the renewing power

power to foster the development of autonomy from the nation-state and the capitalist economy. The KCK forms the main assembly of the council system in Kurdistan, including delegates from all the participating Kurdish regions. They elect an executive body with a mandate to work on issues of importance for all regions, such as diplomatic representation on a global level, ideological and strategic proposals, and questions of defense. They also administrate the People’s Defence Forces (HPG), containing the armed wings from all parts of the movement. Over the past decade, despite heavy repression and wartime conditions, the movement in northern Kurdistan has created structures for a democratic, ecological, and gender-liberated society.

Like the KCK, which encompasses the structures of democratic autonomy throughout Kurdistan, the Demokratik Toplum Kongresi (DTK), the Democratic Society Congress, comprises the council system in the region of Bakur, or northern Kurdistan, which falls within the borders of the Turkish nation-state. The DTK’s federated structure begins at the level of the village or urban neighborhood up through district, city, and ultimately the region of Bakur. At the highest level of the federation, the DTK assembly includes recallable delegates from more than five hundred civil society organizations, labor unions, and political parties, with a forty percent gender quota and reserved positions for religious minorities in the assemblies and a dual co-chair system with one position reserved for a male and the other for a female. In classic grassroots style, participants attempt to solve local problems on a local level, and only if they cannot find a solution do they seek one on the next level. Non-Kurdish people take part in some of the assemblies, including members of the Azerbaijani and Aramaic communities. Also, young people are organizing themselves both within and parallel to these structures under the slogan “Capitalism is an old man—we’re a movement made of the united powers of women and youth.” This sentiment emphasizes the importance of youth and women’s organizing

in overcoming the entrenched legacies of hierarchy in Kurdish society, but also reflects the philosophy that youth is not a matter of actual age, but rather a mindset akin to the Zapatista slogan “*caminando preguntando*,” moving on while continually questioning.

This federated structure of assemblies and civil organizations was established to resolve common problems and to support the self-organization of the whole population through bottom-up democratic processes. Thus, rather than being defined purely in terms of ethnicity or territory, the concept of democratic autonomy proposes local and regional structures through which cultural differences can be freely expressed. As a result, there are a colorful variety of educational, cultural, and social organizations and experiments with cooperative economics developing around northern Kurdistan. It’s worth highlighting the mediation committees, which aim to find a consensus between parties in conflict and therefore a long-term arrangement, rather than postponement of the problem through punishment. This often leads to many long discussions, but it shows a concept of collective responsibility in which the accused shouldn’t be excluded through penalties or detention, but should be made aware of the injustice and harm that his or her behavior has caused. This has made the state courts superfluous in many strongholds of the Kurdish liberation movement. Alongside these mediation committees and other councils, you can find social centers for youth and for women on all levels of society, with activities ranging from Kurdish language courses and political seminars to music and theater groups.

This is the context in which we should understand the success of the ongoing revolution in Rojava. The Kurdish movement can look back on forty years of radical struggle, with its failures, reflections, and advances. Even though the formation of democratic autonomy in northern Kurdistan has proved much more chaotic, remains entangled with the old state struc-

simply following whatever drives and inclinations come up for them, in an environment where everything is allowed. At the same time there is a feeling of subjection and therefore an acceptance of a predetermined, unchangeable environment. This often leads on the one hand to a pessimistic sense of paralysis, hopelessness and depression, and on the the other hand to a guilt-fueled re-entrenchment in identities that derive from the power structures they are criticizing (white, middle-class, privileged) and submersion in various forms of commercialized lifestyle scenes (punk, hardcore, radical left, “anarchist”)... all of which both lead to and arise from this omnipresent individualism. I think it might be interesting to analyze the impact of the youth rebellions of 1968, because it gave a huge drive to this development. We’re confronted with masses of people around us blaming the unconscious society, politicians, cops, or fascists as bogeymen, but who have totally lost their grip on reality and their own responsibility and agency. Instead, most of us keep on living the liberal myth of economic success and retirement, fleeing into studies, work, leisure, privatized political activism, holidays, parties, drugs, consumption—suicide!

There’s a thin line between this present Western conception of anarchism and liberalism. Although classical anarchists like Emma Goldman recognized the importance of positive freedom, “freedom to,” liberalism focuses on negative freedom, or “freedom from,” the notion that people are free insofar as they are not constrained by laws and regulations. This understanding of freedom fits easily into the ethos of individualism, private property, and capitalism, completely denying the dialectical relationship between individual and society and the fact that human beings have always lived in communities as social individuals, bound together through common rules and values. We think that human values are socially determined, and that social rules and regulations to uphold them do not represent a restriction on some pre-existing freedom, but form part of the conditions of a free life, which must include individual and col-

What lessons have you learned from your time spent in Kurdistan for radical struggles in Germany and beyond?

First, my engagement with the Kurdish liberation movement, as an historical struggle and a society in rebellion, has actually made it possible for me to believe again—not only that this world is absolutely unacceptable, but in the possibility of fighting for another world. I would call this reclaiming the power of imagination, which has unleashed a huge feeling of motivation and also a certain seriousness in many of our friends. It's overwhelming to see the huge collective consciousness in Kurdish society.

Looking back at Western metropolitan life, it seems so obvious how patriarchy and capitalism have spread into every part of our lives. I think we've made huge leaps in understanding our own history and society through discussion with our friends from the Kurdish youth movement. In particular, their focus on philosophy and self-perception has made clear how much we, as anarchists or the radical left, are hampered by moralism. We've learned to base our actions on these notions of good/bad, right/wrong, and guilt/pity, drummed into us through religion and academia and theory, rather than on our actual common ethical attachments and friendships. To start the process of liberating ourselves, we have to overcome the liberal bourgeois personality and capitalist behavior, to vanquish the inner state mentality.

In contrast to this, in Germany and more broadly in the West we're confronted with internalized individualism and liberalism, not only in the broader society but also within our political "scene"—a scene with a general tendency towards nihilist lifestyles and identity politics. In my observation, most of the militants in our scene, as well as the majority of liberal youth, give an absolute precedence to the "freedom" of the individual,

tures, and is caught in a social and ecological war rather than in a military one, it is widely comparable with the processes going on in Rojava.

One question anarchists have asked about this struggle is how much the recent anti-authoritarian direction of the Kurdish struggle—including the structures of democratic confederalism, the principles of women's liberation, and so forth—are coming from the top down, from Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK leadership. It would seem like a contradiction if an anti-authoritarian revolution were being directed from above! What is your perspective on the relationship between the ideology of the leaders in these organizations and the transformation of social relations and structures in Kurdistan?

That's a quite heavy point, which we discuss quite a lot, and which, at least in Germany, is linked to a certain fear stemming from bad experiences in revolutionary struggles. For sure, the question of leadership and initiative is one of the most difficult ones when we're dealing with self-organization, and it is also a hard one for the Kurdish movement. The real questions are: how can there be a drastic revolutionary change in society? Who evaluates the need? And who makes decisions about

the direction? The answer has to be: everyone, for everything, always. Perhaps the evolution of the Kurdish movement and the PKK can offer a useful example, which has yet to be fully understood in the Western world. Öcalan and the PKK are not simply acting out a fixed ideological pattern or a dogmatic system, like the one and only true path of Marxism-Leninism asserted by the former socialist states. Maybe the aesthetics of revolutionary socialism—the bearded leader and the grim, selfless guerrilla warrior—mislead us, when we don't look beyond the image and inquire further.

What we're seeing in Kurdistan today, both in Rojava and in the north, is a new method by which the whole of society is coming into consciousness. If we understand the persistence of state and patriarchal oppression as a problem of people remaining unconscious of the possibilities for resistance, we see the importance of activating the consciousness of society. In all parts of Kurdistan where the liberation movement organizes, we find committees forming what they call academies. An academy can take many different forms, but we can most easily understand it as a collective space for forming a common consciousness. Some might be as simple as a discussion group that meets once a week, but there are also longer, more intensive ones, in which all activists participate (and, in recent years, any member of society who wants to take part can join). The academies are always linked to other social organizations; the youth groups and the women's movement have their own academies, while other groups organize general academies for everyone. Each of these emphasizes self-empowerment, and in these institutions the proposals offered by Öcalan and the PKK are discussed and criticized intensively. And those leaders are not the only ones offering proposals: each institution, each committee, and each individual can spread their own ideas.

This practice developed out of the process of political education within the old PKK, where it was standard for every militant and guerrilla fighter to receive both military and ideologi-

cal training. As the new paradigm emerged, it became clear that the goal was not simply to create a well-educated philosophical vanguard like in the old cadre-system of Leninism, but to liberate the consciousness of literally every person who takes part in the process of forming the new society. Those who want to self-organize have to reflect on their relation to the world, which means deepening one's exploration of philosophy.

One method often used in these academies is what we might call an associative analysis. When discussing a certain topic, everybody offers their own associations with it, and through the process of each person sharing their impressions and experiences while others listen carefully and strive to understand, a consensus can be formed. On a theoretical level, this approach negates the opportunity for "objectivity," and puts a method of multiple subjectivities in its place. When you identify your own position confronting a certain argument, including both your own will to act as well as the fears that come up in you, then what is strategically necessary will become clear.

Today, the role and position of militants in the PKK and PAJK (the Free Women's Party) has changed compared to the 1980s and '90s. Their self-image has grown closer to what we might understand as a militant anarchist personality: fighting for self-empowerment and mutual aid. Under the old paradigm, the militant needed to be selfless and self-sacrificing. Although this conception is not totally gone, it is changing, as discussions in the movement reject dichotomies and support fighting both for individual processes of self-transformation as well as for collective beauty and strength. As their conception of the role of militants has changed, they've rejected the outdated idea of becoming a vanguard. Instead, it comes down to living a well-organized, secular ascetic form of life, based in the idea that fighting for our friends and for the revolution is the best way a life can be lived.