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# Stalinist caterpillar into libertarian butterfly?

The evolving ideology of the PKK

Alex de Jong

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9 March 2015

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p. 42.

## Introduction

The siege of Kobani by the Islamic State (IS) and its tenacious defense by mostly Kurdish forces brought international attention to the Syrian Kurdish PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, Democratic Union Party). The PYD is the leading Kurdish force in a large part of northern Syria where it has strong influence in three enclaves, or 'cantons', of Kurdish-majority areas. In November 2013 it declared in these cantons the transitional administration of 'Rojava' (Western Kurdistan).

The stated goal of the Rojava project is to build a liberated, democratic society with equal rights for women in which different ethnic and religious groups can live together. The ideological inspiration for this project is the thought of the Turkish Kurdish PKK and its leader Abdullah Öcalan.

In the early to mid nineties the PKK led a fierce guerrilla-war against the Turkish state and it remains a significant force in itself and through its influence over other organizations. Initially, the PKK followed a 'marxist-leninist' ideology. However, the movement underwent deep ideological changes, especially after Öcalan's capture in 1999. The PYD denies any organizational links with the PKK but it was set up by Syrian PKK-members and claims to follow the same ideology as the current PKK.

This article examines this ideology and its changes in several key aspects. The first two parts discuss the early strategic orientation of the PKK and its similarity to other national liberation movements of the time. Part three discusses the idea of 'creating a new man', an idea that became central to the PKK's conception of the future society they struggled for. This idea was a distinctive characteristic of the PKK. It is not unusual for activists in this movement to describe their political convictions as 'the ideology of Öcalan' and part four discusses the role of Abdullah Öcalan as the leader and ideologue of the movement. Part five discusses another distinguishing characteristic of the PKK: the role that it sees for women and

women's liberation in social change. Part six and seven deal with the changing ideas of the PKK about the future society: its vision of a 'democratic civilization and its changing conception of 'socialism'.

The goal is not to provide a history of the PKK but parts of its history will be discussed to situate its ideological evolution. The focus is on the movement's 'official' ideology as written down in statements of Öcalan and documents of the PKK. How this ideology is translated into actual politics on the ground and how grass-roots activists interpret it are questions that are beyond the reach of the article. The influence of Abdullah Öcalan in the PKK can hardly be overestimated. As one former member put it; 'the PKK is in a certain sense identical with its founder, Abdullah Öcalan'.<sup>1</sup>

Because of his dominant role as both the leader and ideologue of the movement, the article will give extensive attention to statements and writings of Öcalan himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Selahattin Çelik, *Den Berg Ararat versetzen. Die politischen, militärischen, ökonomischen und gesellschaftlichen Dimensionen des aktuellen Kurdischen aufstands*, Köln 2002, p. 37.

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Kurdish fighters, guerrilla's and activists. It is them who will decide the future of the movement.

Alex de Jong

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## 1. Roots of the PKK

The current Kurdish liberation movement in Turkey has its roots in the radicalization of the sixties. After a coup by 'progressive Kemalist' army officers in 1960, a new Turkish constitution was introduced that promised the right to work, a minimum wage, the right to strike as well as freedom to organize. In this atmosphere, trade-unionists and progressive intellectuals organized the 'Workers Party of Turkey' (*Türkiye İsci Partisi*, TIP), a party that in 1965 won three per cent of the vote and 15 seats in the parliament. The TIP was a reformist party that re-introduced socialist ideas that had been made taboo and even outlawed by the Kemalist state.

The TIP condemned the militant actions of radical-left youth activists and had only shallow roots among the working class. However, the TIP did have relatively strong support among Turkey's Kurds. The Kurdish provinces of Turkey have always been the poorest part of the country, partly the result of racist state policies that discriminated against the Kurds. Speaking Kurdish was a crime, use of the letters x, q and w – which exist in the Kurdish alphabet but not in the Turkish – could be prosecuted, publications that simply mentioned the word 'Kurd' were banned and the Kemalist state tried to assimilate the Kurdish minority into the Turkish majority. In the late sixties, a number of Kurdish members of the TIP started to discuss the specific problems of the Kurdish population in the country. Out of these discussions grew the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearts (*Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları*, DDKO). The word 'Eastern' was an euphemism to avoid state-repression since any discussion of even the existence of Kurds was banned.

Simultaneously, Turkey saw the growth of a new, militant Left. In 1965 the Federation of the Revolutionary Youth of Turkey (Turkiye Devrimci Genclik Federasyonu or Dev-Genc) was formed. Dev-Genc members organized university occupations, protested against the presence of US-troops, organized solidarity with workers' protests and fought fascists on campus and in the streets. Parts of the workers movement also radicalized and in 1967 the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey (Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, DİSK) was formed as a left alternative to the established trade union federation. Workers also organized wildcat strikes and factory occupations, peasants occupied land. Out of this ferment and radicalization the first armed groups grew in the early seventies. Inspired by the Cuban revolution and Maoism, these groups saw Turkey as a 'neo-colony' of the US and considered themselves to be fighting for a 'national-democratic' revolution that would break the grip of imperialism on the country, bring true national independence and open the way for a second, socialist stage of the revolution.

Abdullah Öcalan began his political life in these radical-left circles. Born in 1949 as a son of a poor peasant family, Öcalan grew up in a very religious and conservative environment. In 1966, he went to Ankara to attend a vocational school that trained students to work in the state's land registry offices. In 1969, he graduated and found work, first in Diyarbakir and after a year in Istanbul. Shortly before graduating, Öcalan had become interested in politics and started to visit political meetings. Öcalan joined the DDKO and protests of the radical youth. In 1971 the army staged a new coup, now to stamp out the radical movement. The TIP was banned and the DDKO closed down as many activists fled the country. In 1972 Öcalan, who by that time had begun to study political science in Ankara, was arrested during a protest in solidarity with Turkish leftists who had been killed in a firefight with the police. Öcalan was sentenced to seven months and found himself in the military prison Mamak in the company of Dev-Genc leaders and other expe-

anti-Marxist', this stock of ideas has fallen away and there is less to fill the gaps.

The resulting vagueness and incompleteness has its useful sides. The liberal 'conflict monitoring' NGO International Crisis Group for example has suggested that what they call the 'unbearable vagueness' of the goal of democratic autonomy is a tactic to make it harder for the Turkish state to ban Kurdish groups for propagating 'separatism' but this underestimates the changes the PKK and the movement under its hegemony have gone through (it also does not take into account that the Turkish state has no problem banning Kurdish organizations under flimsy pretexts). But the vagueness does make the project open for very wide interpretations. Because of this vagueness, the PKK's political project can appeal to the sympathy from broad layers. From liberals to anarchists, people can recognize their own desires in it.

Even more than when he was the leader of the movement in a direct sense, and in contact with his followers on a daily sense, Öcalan has become a prophet-like figure. And, like with the statements of other prophets, his words are open to interpretation. Activists on the ground have considerable space to maneuver, and to interpret his directives in ways that suit their circumstances. The incompleteness of the new ideology and the relative vagueness of Öcalan's texts make it possible to adapt it pragmatically to the local situation, while activists can still claim fidelity to 'the ideology of Öcalan'.

Decisive for the evolution of the movement is how activists interpret and shape this ideology. The less centralized approach towards building social organizations opens the possibility for a more open and progressive praxis than was possible in the 'old' PKK. The Kurdish movement has not only maintained itself against the Turkish state but also won concessions from it. A few decades ago, the Turkish state denied there existed something like a 'Kurdish minority', today it is forced to take the Kurdish movement into account as a political force. This was made possible by immense sacrifices of



society. It is also clearly visible in its approach towards women's liberation when it demands that women and men 'unlearn' the attitudes that supposedly perpetuate patriarchy. 'We want to build a new society. Let's realize this new society, equality, freedom, esteem, and love among ourselves first', Öcalan, 2000.<sup>2</sup>

One constant throughout the PKK's evolution is the centrality of *Serok Apo* and his statements. When German activists went to North Kurdistan to 'see for themselves' how democratic autonomy is implemented, they were repeatedly told that activists were 'following instructions' of Öcalan, defenders of Kobani claim 'the thought of Apo' was what enabled them to defeat of IS, his picture is prominently displayed on t-shirts and banners. PYD representatives describe their ideology as 'the ideology of Öcalan', Kurdish women's activists say that they have learned everything they know about feminism from Öcalan. The continuation of ideological and political, if not anymore directly organizational, leadership by a single individual is at odds with the claims of self-emancipation of democratic autonomy. The PKK is an confounding case of a movement that supposedly has embraced a vision of 'bottom-up democracy' on instructions 'from above'.

In the 'old' PKK, gaps in the theory, subjects that were not dealt with or left unclear, were filled with a stock of received ideas from 'Marxist-Leninist' theories. The writings of Mehmet Can Yüce, one of the movement's more prominent ideologues from that time, could almost be written by an ideologue of another party from a similar current — as long as they they do not deal with the few topics on which the PKK had developed its own views like the history of the Comintern. The PKK programs and statements from the late seventies and eighties are in many ways interchangeable with those of other Marxist-Leninist national-liberation movements. Now that the PKK defines itself as 'neither Marxist nor

rienced radicals. His arrest radicalized him further and the political discussions he witnessed in jail made a strong impression on him. He decided to dedicate himself fully to radical politics. After his release from jail, the coup regime had successfully repressed many of the radical groups.

Öcalan didn't feel at home in any of the existing groups, either Kurdish or Turkish. The Turkish radical-left, more or less under the influence of Kemalist nationalism and the theory of a revolution by stages, tended to neglect the oppression of the Kurds or even denied this was an issue. Such groups reasoned that since Turkey itself was an oppressed nation, the Turkish state was incapable of imperialist policies like national oppression of the Kurds. If they did recognize there was oppression of Kurds specifically, many Turkish leftists saw this as an issue that could be dealt with only after a national-democratic revolution that would liberate Turkey from imperialism. In 1975 the traditional Kurdish nationalist movement suffered a heavy blow with the defeat of the guerrilla-war in Iraq led by Mullah Mustafa Barzani (father of the current president of the Iraqi Kurdish region, Massoud Barzani). Barzani had allied with the US, Israel and Iran against the Iraqi state but was abandoned by his allies after Baghdad made concessions to Tehran.

Öcalan drew the conclusion that the Turkish Left could not be the champion of the Kurds and neither could this be traditional nationalists like Barzani who looked for support abroad. The Kurds would have to fight for themselves, as Kurds. Öcalan started to build his own group that adopted the notion of pioneering Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi that 'Kurdistan' was an international colony, occupied by Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. From 1975 on, Öcalan's group started to agitate under the name Kurdish Revolutionaries (*Soresgeren Kurdistan*, SK). Its core members often resembled Öcalan: young Kurds from a poor, rural background that had radicalized as students. This was a very different layer than that of the wealthy family of Barzani or the urban students that played an important role in the Turkish Left. The SK was not exclusively

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<sup>2</sup> Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess', p.13.

Kurdish but also included a number of Turkish leftists who saw the liberation of Kurdistan as a precondition to revolution in Turkey.

Unlike other Left groups, the SK decided not to spend resources on publications, instead recruiting people through intense one-on-one discussions. Its recruitment focused on poor, often illiterate Kurds, often from a rural background who had moved to the cities to look for work. Another characteristic of the SK was its willingness to use violence against groups like the fascist Grey Wolves. This brought the SK a certain respect and attraction to radical youth which helped make up for the lack of a well-known leader or financial means. This militancy appealed to many Kurds who had recognized that the Turkish state would not allow the Kurds to free themselves through non-violent means and who, after the defeat of the traditional nationalism of Barzani, were looking for an alternative.

Former PKK central committee Mehmet Can Yüce later explained his radicalization: 'You're a colonized nation and you seek your rights. You can bring out magazines and set up associations and enter parliament – in short, you can operate within the limits that the state has set, but the trouble is that the state outlaws the use of the word 'Kurd', they won't let refer to a place called Kurdistan. Saying these words is a crime, splittism, ample cause to get you arrested, tortured, kept in jail for years on end. So, what is keeping this nation under repression? Force. The army, the police, the gendarmerie, the counter-guerillas, the far-right Nationalist Action Party. In such a country, where the machinery of repression is so organized and entrenched, you're left with one route, and that's to use force to answer with force'.<sup>1</sup>

A few years later, the SK had won modest support in several of the bigger cities of the Kurdish regions. In 1977, the group was reorganized as the Kurdish Workers Party (*Partiya Karkeren*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Christopher de Bellaigue, *Rebel Land: Among Turkey's Forgotten Peoples*, London 2009.

meandering style. The juxtaposition of musings on the meaning of 'humanity' and 'freedom', with remnants of the old jargon can be quite bewildering. Terms familiar from Marxism are used in ways that imply that for Öcalan their meaning is very different: the 'Second Manifesto' talks about 'feudal nomads', the prison writings declare the 'feudal' Kurdish leaders to be a 'comprador petty-bourgeoisie'. Terms are left undefined and vague. 'Democracy' for example has become both the goal and method for solving social problems and the defining characteristic of a new civilization. But in hundreds of pages, Öcalan does not offer a sustained explanation of what the word means to him. In brief, it is often unclear what Öcalan is trying to say.

The ideology of the PKK has undergone major shifts since its foundation in the late seventies. From its original Marxism-Leninism, that saw the conquest of state-power as liberation, there was a shift to conceiving of 'freedom' and 'independence' in personal terms. From a Stalinist conception of socialism as state-ownership of the means of production, there was a shift to seeing socialism as the creation of a new man. From a 'united and independent Kurdistan' and the formation of a new nation-state, there was a shift to a 'free Kurdistan' which in one way or another could possibly exist inside the borders of the Turkish state. From seeing women as resource for the revolutionary struggle, there was a shift to seeing women as such as central actors in the movement.

The PKK was not only a political and military leadership, it would reorganize the new society. It would built not only social relations that would reflect the desired society but even create the new personalities that would characterize the future society. This principle of prefiguration, of building in the present elements that will reflect the future society, is still present in the movement. Today, it is not only personalities but also the political structures of the future society that the PKK hopes to built in the present by organizing structures that supposedly carry the kernel of the new

## 8. Potent vagueness

In a 2011, Öcalan stated 'Marxist governments failed nonetheless because they attempted to implement a kind of government called "the dictatorship of the proletariat". This model of governance was the result of abstract and theoretical reasoning and could be interpreted in virtually any way. Our experience of real socialism shows that extreme class formation and state power structures were able to form under this proletarian model. The countries that applied this model in fact developed the most authoritarian and totalitarian structures in history. In the end, this kind of government devoured its own children. The societies concerned panicked and sought to rescue and protect themselves from this monster by turning to the embrace of capitalism and its class structures'.<sup>1</sup>

This quote is characteristic of Öcalan's texts. The confusing language is typical of much of his texts; 'a model' that could be 'be interpreted in virtually any way' but can still be implemented? The analysis of the collapse of 'real socialism' echoes liberal idealist ideas that the soviet-bloc collapsed because of its 'totalitarianism' — a historical and materialist discussion of this development is absent. It is clear from Öcalan's texts that he sees the Soviet ideology as synonymous with 'marxism' and is not familiar with the Marxist currents that developed outside of it or the Marxist criticisms of it.

Öcalan's writings are repetitive and long-winded, something that cannot be blamed only on the confines he is subjected to in prison. Öcalan's texts are immediately recognizable by their

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<sup>1</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

*Kurdistan*, PKK) and adopted a manifesto. This manifesto, 'The Road of the Kurdish Revolution' strongly resembles statements of other 'marxist-leninist' national-liberation movements of the time. In 1977 its first party program, which largely summarizes the ideas in the manifesto, was drafted.

These documents declare that the immediate goal of the PKK is a 'national-democratic' revolution that will lead to an 'independent and democratic Kurdistan'. Any other option than the creation of an independent Kurdish nation-state is vehemently rejected; the original program called for exposing 'capitulationist attitudes that do not aim for smashing the colonial yoke of the Turkish Republic and suggest things like "regional autonomy", "autonomy" et cetera', since such proposals are; 'in essence a compromise with colonialism'. The program calls for a 'determined struggle' against such ideas.<sup>2</sup>

The revolution will take the form of a prolonged armed struggle or 'people's war', based on the peasantry. The leadership of the revolution has to be 'the working class', led by the PKK. The power of the 'feudal' leaders of Kurdish society needed to be broken since these are the representatives of colonialism. The peasantry and the urban petty bourgeois are the two main allies of the working class. There is no Kurdish 'national bourgeoisie' because colonialism did not allow such a class to develop. International allies of the revolution are 'socialist countries', working class parties of capitalist countries and 'the liberation movements of oppressed peoples of the world'. Its enemies are the Turkish state, its 'native feudal-collaborators', and 'the imperialist powers behind them'. After the 'national-democratic' revolution, the struggle will, 'without interruption', proceed in a socialist revolution. This manifesto, and the party symbol, a red flag with the hammer-and-sickle, would be in place until the fifth party-congress in 1995.

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<sup>2</sup> PKK, Programm, Köln 1984, p. 45, 49.

The documents are obviously heavily influenced by Maoist ideas but do not adopt the designation of the Soviet-Union as 'social-imperialist'. The ruling parties of the Soviet-Union and China are both criticized as implementing 'revisionist' policies. Overall the 'really existing socialist countries' are considered allies of the Kurdish revolution, but none of their governing parties is accepted as an ideological lodestar. PKK-ideologue Mehmet Can Yüce later mocked Turkish left-wing groups that were looking for a 'Mecca' in Moscow, Tirana or Peking.

The PKK was not the only Kurdish leftist group to adopt such a framework at the time, nor was it the only one to declare armed struggle a necessity. In fact, several other Kurdish groups at the time, like the Vanguard Workers Party of Kurdistan (PPKK—*Partiya Pêşenga Karkerên Kurdistan*) and Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan (TKSP, known as *Özgürlük Yolu*, Freedom Path) had more support at the time and made similar declarations.

One minor difference from other groups at the time was the highly charged language of the PKK's funding documents; liberating Kurdistan was called a 'holy' task and 'our Movement...would deem leading our people with ideological, organizational and political means to be a sacred and historical task' and 'having a life distant from the Kurdistan Revolution would be no different from a bestial lifestyle'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ali Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds. A theoretical analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan*, New York 2006, p. 86.

We encourage people to try such things. For example in Kobani there is a women's cooperation in which around one hundred women work. Clothes are produced and sold there'.<sup>9</sup>

Öcalan's ideas for an alternative future society can be described as social-democratic: 'In my eyes, justice demands that creative work is enumerated according to its contribution to the entire product. Renumeration of creative work, which contributes to the productivity of the society, has to be in proportion to other creative activities. Provision of employment to everybody will be a general public task. Everybody will be able to participate in the health care system, education, sports and arts according to their capabilities and needs'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Schmidinger, *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan. Analysen und Stimmen aus Rojava*, Vienna 2014, p. 222, 223.

<sup>10</sup> Öcalan, *Prison Writings*, p. 60.

exploitation that leads to class-divisions and the extra-economic oppression of certain identities. Instead, these are all described as forms of oppression. Perhaps this echoes the reduction of the 'old' PKK of class-position to the political position one had towards the party.

The continuing oppression of certain identities, like the Kurdish one in Turkey, are blamed by Öcalan on state-policies that are lagging behind the development of the new civilization, a development that however is unavoidable because of technological progress.<sup>8</sup> The task then is to pressure the state to allow the realization of the democratic potential that already exists. This in turn would enable in the long term the creation of of some kind of socialism and the realization of the old dream of the disappearance of the state as such.

The social-economic vision of the new PKK in the medium-term is an economy based on cooperatives. These would contribute to the 'democratization' of society. PYD co-chair Asya Abdullah discussed the economic ideas for Rojava in February 2014;

Who should own the means of production? The state, the cantons, the capitalists? What about private property? Who should own the factories and land?

In principle we protect private property. However, the property of the people is the property of the people and is protected by it. We have only a short while ago founded a council for trade and economy that will draw up rules for trade and economic relations and establish economic relationship abroad.

But again on the issue of the means of production: are there any forms of cooperatives or alternative forms of production in Rojava?

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<sup>8</sup> Öcalan, *The third domain*, p. 54, 56.

## 2. People's War

A more important difference was that the small group of mainly youth that made up the early PKK actually made organizing armed struggle an immediate task, while the other groups declared that armed struggle would only follow after a phase of building political support for it. Talking about the leaders of the other Kurdish Left groups in the late seventies, people who had often criticized the PKK and their leader for their lack of ideological finesse and political experience, Öcalan declared in 1996; 'I had a principle for myself: Why did I dare to initiate and believe in this war? Because the greatest harlot is one who does not fight. My word at the very beginning was this; I moulded myself to believe this. All of these men in the Kurdish groupings which claimed to undertake the national cause are dishonest. Why? Because, I said, they prostitute themselves more than a prostitute. I said I will not be like them; I will fight for loftier aims.'<sup>1</sup>

The PKK's willingness and ability to use violence appealed to many oppressed Kurds. It was during the following war that the PKK built itself. Revenge became an important theme in the self-conception of the PKK throughout the eighties and the nineties as the war grew more intense and the state tried to terrorize the Kurds into submission. One 1985 brochure even declared the PKK to be a 'revolutionary revenge organization' and stated; 'Pseudo-socialist sermons will not save us any better than the religious sermons that they have come to replace. Violence...will in Kurdistan not only be the midwife assisting in the delivery [of a new society]

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<sup>1</sup> Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds*, p. 89.

but it will create everything anew. Revolutionary violence has to play this role, and it will, we say, assume the form of revolutionary revenge'.<sup>2</sup>

The class composition of the PKK was different from that of the other groups. In the words of Kurdistan expert Martin van Bruinessen; the PKK was 'the only organization whose members were drawn almost exclusively from the lowest social classes – the uprooted, half-educated village and small-town youth who knew what it felt like to be oppressed, and who wanted action, not ideological sophistication'.<sup>3</sup> '[T]ribal elites are represented in various other parties but not in the PKK. Rather, this party represents the most marginal sections of Kurdish society'.<sup>4</sup>

The PKK first began to move against the traditional Kurdish elite, *aghas* – the 'feudal' landlords that with the aid of their supporters controlled whole villages and often closely cooperated with the Turkish state. The PKK fought on the side of rebelling peasants and lost dozens of members in clashes with the militia of landlords. The guiding principle in choosing its targets was for the PKK however not social antagonism, but the politics of the *aghas*: whether they opposed the national movement or not. At the same time, various Turkish leftist and Kurdish groups fought among themselves; 'the PKK was initially relatively insignificant among [rival organizations] and only became known because it was the most violent'.<sup>5</sup> During fighting between different radical groups, dozens were killed. The PKK was both initiator and victim of such violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, 'Between guerrilla war and political murder: the Workers' Party of Kurdistan', Middle East Report (1988) 153 (July – August), 40–42+44–46+50, there p. 46, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Bruinessen, 'Between guerrilla war and political murder', p 40, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 42

<sup>5</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, 'The nature and uses of violence in the Kurdish conflict', Paper presented at the international colloquium "Ethnic Construction and Political Violence", organized by the Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Cortona, July 2–3, 1999, p. 10.

for class-struggle have (still) not developed in Kurdish society.<sup>5</sup> Such a viewpoint seems to contradict the first manifesto and program that declared the revolution should be led by the working class. But by this was meant that it should be under leadership of the PKK, since it is this party that supposedly carried socialist consciousness and impeded it to the people. Heval Zilan put this view like this; 'Firstly, the army [meaning the PKK guerrilla] is the protector of all the created values. Secondly, it is the carrier of socialist consciousness, which she also passes on through to society. Thirdly it is the army that turns the labor carried out in Kurdistan into value and creates the corresponding consciousness. Fourthly, the army is the basis of the socialist society'.<sup>6</sup> Since there was, according to the PKK, hardly a proletariat in Kurdistan nor class-struggle, it was the party that needed to create socialism.

It is not surprising that as the PKK changed from claiming to be the vanguard to being an ideological center, the emphasis on 'socialism', whether as a social-economic system or as the name for a society of the New Man, also became less pronounced. The project of 'democratic autonomy' is based on different identities and the struggle for the free expression of these ideas. 'Worker' is just one identity among others. Today, Öcalan believes that recognition of democratic rights for all these different identities would bring about the new 'democratic civilization'. He believes the twentieth century saw 'the disappearance of the material foundations of class division', because of 'technological progress'. But the possibility of a society without class divisions remains unfulfilled because of the state; 'the state governs the social structure' and it is the state that 'continues class divisions'.<sup>7</sup> Any discussion of capital is absent. Öcalan does not distinguish between social-economic

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<sup>5</sup> Öcalan, Prison Writings, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> [Unknown author], Licht am Horizont, online at [<http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/isku/hintergrund/Licht/IV-1-4.htm>].

<sup>7</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, The third domain. Reconstructing liberation. Extracts from the submissions to the ECHR, London 2003, p. 52, 53

The PKK's socialism became more abstract as it moved from the stalinist idea that socialism means a party-state that owns the means of production to the creation of a new man. What remained consistent during this evolution was the assumption that it is the *party* that establishes socialism. The working class and its self-emancipation were not issues in the old ideology, even though the PKK paid lip-service to being to a party of the working class.

Whereas in Marxism, the working class is the actor that through its self-emancipation can create socialism, the PKK had a rather distrustful attitude towards the working class and did not see the self-emancipation of the working class as the way to socialism. Many workers in Kurdistan were employed by the state and lived in the cities.<sup>2</sup> The PKK, whose members predominately had a rural background, looked with mistrust at the city population that in their eyes was privileged and too closely associated with the institutions of the Turkish state. In a book based on conversations at the PKK's party school, a cadre named Heval Zilan put it like this in the mid-nineties; 'The proletariat that has grown here is a proletariat in the service of the enemy. It is not a strong power. It does not play a role important enough to be able to be the vanguard. That does not mean that one does not have to take up proletarian struggle in Kurdistan. It also does not mean that no proletarian ideology should emerge. [...] We know that over 70 per cent of the Kurdish population are peasants, naturally under feudal conditions'.<sup>3</sup>

In the early nineties, Öcalan stated that there were no pronounced class divisions in Kurdish society.<sup>4</sup> The real dividing line was between 'collaborators' and 'patriots', not between capitalists and working people. Recently, Öcalan insisted the conditions

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<sup>2</sup> Çelik, Den Berg Ararat versetzen, p. 223 – 224.

<sup>3</sup> [Unknown author], Licht am Horizont. Annäherungen an die PKK, n.p. 1996 online at [<http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/isku/hintergrund/Licht/IV-1-3.htm>].

<sup>4</sup> Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, p. 82.

When in 1980 the army staged yet another coup, the PKK had become the strongest Kurdish party in Turkey. After the coup, tens of thousands were arrested. The Turkish Left, that in the previous years had again grown to a significant force, was largely unable to withstand the repression. At the end of 1983, there were still 40.000 political prisoners that were routinely brutally tortured. Among the prisoners were thousands of PKK-supporters and members. Many of them continued the struggle inside the prisons, undertaking 'deathfasts' that claimed the lives of leading members or committing suicide in protest. The dead became important martyr-figures for the movement and their sacrifices reinforced the reputation of PKK-members as unyielding revolutionaries.

Öcalan himself escaped the repression; shortly before the coup, he had gone to Syria and from there he went to Lebanon. In Lebanon, he made contact with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and later other Palestinian groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Fatah. Abu Laila, a leader of the DFLP, later said of Öcalan; 'We had met other Turkish Kurds and they didn't seem to be very reliable. This man seemed to be serious. He didn't want [military or financial] assistance...he only wanted to send volunteers...to be trained for the future'. 'These people turned out to be really serious, real fighters, real soldiers. It was clear he [Öcalan] had some popular base in Kurdistan.'<sup>6</sup> The Palestinians provided valuable military and organizational training to the Kurds, but the PKK members received their ideological training separate from the other groups. The PKK joined the Palestinians in the fight against the Israeli army when it invaded Lebanon in 1982.

A few years later, the PKK launched its people's war. Öcalan had established contact with the Syrian regime and was allowed to base himself in Damascus. The PKK opened a training camp in a Syrian

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<sup>6</sup> Aliza Marcus, Blood and Belief. The PKK and the Kurdish fight for independence, New York 2007, p. 55

controlled part of Lebanon. In 1982, the PKK reached an agreement with the major Kurdish rebel group in Iraq, Barzani's KDP, that allowed them to set up camps near the Turkish border. The PKK started small-scale armed actions in Turkish Kurdistan and agitation among the rural communities in the border-area. Its first large action took place in 1984 when it attacked several army barracks and temporarily took control of some villages. PKK-fighters distributed statements declaring their goal was 'the struggle of our people for national independence, a democratic society, freedom and unity, under the leadership of the PKK, against imperialism, Turkish colonial fascism and its local lackeys'. At the same time, the PKK appealed to 'revolutionaries and the working people from Turkey'; 'every blow of the HRK [the armed wing of the PKK] against colonial fascism is a blow against fascism in Turkey'.<sup>7</sup> However, cooperation between the PKK and the Turkish radical-left was very difficult. The military coup had decimated the Turkish Left and the PKK tried to dominate any alliance, reasoning that the Turkish Left had proven to be incapable of leading a revolution. In turn this drove away potential allies.

The PKK's theory of revolution at the time was heavily influenced by the Maoist conception of protracted people's war. In this strategy, the armed struggle is the primary means to seize power. The armed struggle is based in the rural countryside and the majority of the fighters are recruited from the peasantry. The struggle is led by the party that supposedly represents 'proletarian' leadership and is supposed to keep socialism as a goal, although the strategy first aims at a 'national-democratic' stage. The people's war starts with small guerrilla attacks and proceeds through different stages of escalating warfare, from a 'strategic defense', in which the rebels are limited to small scale hit-and-run attacks, to a second stage, during which the government forces are pushed on

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<sup>7</sup> Nikolas Brauns and Brigitte Kiechle, *PKK. Perspektiven des kurdischen Freiheitskampfes: Zwischen Selbstbestimmung, EU und Islam*, Stuttgart 2010, p. 55.

## 7. Whatever happened to socialism?

Rather surprising for somebody who once claimed to be a marxist, there is very little mention of the deep social-economic inequality between the west and east of Turkey or proposals for improving the economic position of the Kurdish population in Öcalan's recent writings. The themes of class-struggle and class formation, dealt with in clichés in the old documents, have largely disappeared, except as empty labels for Kurdish collaborators and opponents of the PKK as 'feudalists' or 'petty-bourgeoisie'. A discussion of Kurdistan as a (neo-)colony or victim of exploitation is absent in a book subtitled 'The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. A few times, the possibility of government development in eastern Turkey is mentioned but no more.

For Öcalan, socialism and workers' struggles are of secondary importance compared to questions of religious and ethnic identity and democratic freedoms. This assessment seems to be shared by many of his followers. When a group of German leftists visited North Kurdistan to see the system of democratic autonomy 'in practice', a topic like land reform was not even discussed. Almost echoing the old Maoist principle that attention should be focused on the 'main contradiction' (the national one), one youth activist declared; 'socialism and the anti-capitalist struggle are important components of our ideology. But at this moment our oppression as Kurds is our main problem'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy*, p. 98.



will come together in what I call the system of democratic civilization. This approach has already begun to show its qualities in the solution of conflicts, building of international institutions and the rebuilding of the international order according to democratic principles'.<sup>12</sup>

The prison writings show a strongly idealist bend in taking 'culture' and 'civilization' as the explanation for social-economic and political developments. Öcalan agrees with right-wing US political scientist Samuel Phillips Huntington there is a clash of civilizations between 'east' and 'west'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Öcalan, Prison Writings, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Idem, p. 40.

the defensive while the party expands its political influence. In the final stage, the guerrilla has gathered enough forces and weapons to move to conventional warfare and engage the enemy in decisive battles. Until the mid-nineties, Öcalan and the PKK referenced this strategic framework with an independent Kurdistan as its goal.

Two elements that distinguish the early PKK from like minded movements were its evaluation of the history of the Communist International and of the relation between the party and the guerrilla-army. Already in its early documents, the PKK severely criticized the Soviet-Union of the early twenties and the Comintern for its critical support to Kemalism. In early 1920 Mustafa Suphi, founder of the Turkish Communist Party TKP, and a dozen of his comrades were murdered by right-wing nationalists. The massacre happened with at least tacit approval of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk but that did not stop the signing of the Treaty of Brotherhood between the Grand National Assembly of Turkey under the leadership of Atatürk, and the Soviet-Union on 16 March 1921. PKK statements criticized the early TKP and the Comintern not only for having illusions in the democratic potential of Kemalism but also accused the Comintern of ignorance of the local situation and the Soviet leadership of prioritizing the national security of the Soviet-Union over internationalist and anti-imperialist principles. Such a critical view of the early Soviet-Union was not shared by many 'marxist-leninist' parties that tended to regard Soviet statements as holy writ.

Later, after the implosion of the Soviet-Union, the PKK would attempt to formulate a more exhaustive critique of the Soviet 'model' but this remained rather superficial: it blamed the defects in democracy on faulty decisions of the leadership and the prioritizing of state-interests over those of its citizens but did not explain why such errors could become policy for decade after decade.

Another element that set the PKK apart was that it was a 'guerrilla-party'. Instead of following the Maoist model that dictates a clear distinction between the army and the party that

leads it (Mao: 'our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party'), the two organizations were mixed. In the PKK, fighters were expected to completely give up their previous life and dedicate themselves exclusively to their life as a guerrilla. Cadres who did not have any military responsibilities were also expected to be prepared to join the guerrillas in their mountain bases at any time. According to PKK-leader Duran Kalkan 'this was not only of military value, but more important was its ideological and moral meaning'.<sup>8</sup> Referring to the party's 1986 congress, Kalkan describes this meaning as follows; 'Such a guerrilla makes ideologically a complete break with the ruling order, he breaks in a certain degree with the hierarchical system of the State and of power. That is why at the third Congress there was a serious ideological renewal in the conception of really existing socialism; the really-existing socialist line of individual and familial, petit-bourgeois equal rights and freedom was superseded. Such a measure has consequences inside society as well where it calls forth changes that bring closer freedom and equality. It destroys individual family-life.'

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<sup>8</sup> Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, 57.

nities who talk, debate and make decisions. From the base to the top the elected delegates would form a kind of loose co-ordinating body. They will be the elected representatives of the people for one year'.<sup>11</sup>

This strategy also implies a fundamental shift in the PKK's use of violence. In the old strategy, the armed struggle was essential to defeat the existing state and capture power. Today, the PKK policy towards violence is designated as 'legitimate self-defense'. Violent actions initiated by PKK-fighters are often retaliation for Turkish violence against the PKK and/or civilian supporters of Kurdish rights and serve to maintain a kind of balance of forces, to show the Turkish state that such repression comes with a price and to prove the PKK still has considerable military potential. The only legitimate violence, the PKK now claims, is this kind of defensive violence.

In addition to Bookchin, Öcalan names two other authors as influences, French historian of the *longue durée* Fernand Braudel and world system theorist Immanuel Wallerstein. Öcalan borrows from them the idea that the development of human society can be seen as moving through various world-eras. The stalinist interpretation of historical materialism is still clearly visible in Öcalan's recent texts. The familiar list of 'primitive communism – slavery – feudalism – capitalism – socialism' has been reworked but the idea that history necessarily moves through a progressive sequence of stages is still there. The Sumerian neolithic has replaced primitive communism and the era of 'democratic civilization', which the world is supposedly moving into, replaces socialism.

In this new civilization, political differences will be superseded: 'the political process of the present however make it clear that the world-views of both the right and the left need to undergo a fundamental evolutionary transformation, at the end of which they

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<sup>11</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, The declaration of Democratic Confederalism, 2005 online at [<http://www.kurdmedia.com/article.aspx?id=10174>].

of making citizens actors in exercising self-government. Through strengthening local executive councils and associations of different ethnic, religious, cultural identities and women, pressure is built on the Turkish state to enforce its reform into a democratic republic.

A Kurdish activist explained the strategy as follows; 'When we speak of democratic autonomy, we can't wait till the laws have changed. We have to make the transformation ourselves, in practical deeds. [...] In ten years we will build democratic autonomy and make all the decisions that have to do with city planning and its implementation. [...] So we're slowly building our own institutions, to develop resistance. [...] Turkey has no choice but Democratic Autonomy – the current system is senseless. History overturns everything that is senseless. The state will be forced to realize this and change.'<sup>9</sup>

The 'old' PKK of course already built civil organizations of various kinds but the crucial difference is that now these structures, although they are inspired by it, are supposedly autonomous from the party. The PKK, which reverted to its old name after a few name changes in the early 00's, today states its function is not to be the organizational leadership, but to be the ideological inspiration, a center from which Öcalan's thought is spread through other structures.

The PKK suggests to build structures of democratic autonomy across the borders of the existing nation-states. These structures would then federate from the bottom-up, in a system of 'democratic confederalism'. Bookchin: 'a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities'.<sup>10</sup> Öcalan describes the system as 'a pyramid-like model of organization. Here it is the commu-

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<sup>9</sup> TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*. The council movement, gender liberation, and ecology – in practice, Hamburg 2013. p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Hamdi Akkaya & Jongerden, 'Reassembling the political', p. 6.

### 3. Creating the 'new man'

Kalkan touches upon the most distinctive element of PKK-thought of the eighties and nineties; its ambition to create a 'New Man', characterized by a certain personality. The theme of the 'personality' of the Kurds appeared already in Öcalan's texts in the early eighties and remains a prominent part of it. According to Öcalan there is a metaphysical 'Kurdish mentality', a certain 'composition of the Kurdish psyche'. Öcalan still claims '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'.<sup>1</sup> However, the Kurds have been alienated from their 'true' identity by the attempts of the Turkish state to assimilate the Kurds and by the traditional social structures, what Öcalan calls 'feudalism'.

Through criticism and self-criticism and hard work, PKK-members were expected to remake themselves, to free themselves of their views and attitudes that they had learned in their 'old life' and remould themselves into 'new men'. The goal, as described in the party journal *Serxwebûn*: 'The new man does not drink, does not gamble, never thinks of his own personal pleasure or comfort, and there is nothing feminine about him, those who [in the past] indulged in such activities will, sharp as knife, cut out all these habits as soon as he or she is among new men. The new man's philosophy and morality, the way he sits and stands, his style, ego, attitude and reactions [teпки] are his and his alone. The basis of

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<sup>1</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings. The PKK and the Kurdish question in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, London 2011. p. 21.

all these things is his love for the revolution, freedom, country, and socialism, a love that is as solid as a rock. Applying scientific socialism to the reality of our country creates the new man'.<sup>2</sup>

In a 1983 text, 'On Organization', Öcalan discussed the role of the political organization, citing Marx, Engels, Lenin, Giap and Che Guevera. Like other texts by the PKK and Öcalan at the time, most of it is very similar to the rest of the Kurdish and Turkish radical left but; 'the substantial and distinctive part of the argument in this work is concerned with the "reorganization of the whole society". Rather than structuring a 'Marxist-Leninist party of the working class', an overall reorganization is proposed because Kurdish society has been the victim of a "deliberate disorganizing program from top to bottom implemented by the Turkish colonialists"<sup>3</sup>. Re-organizing Kurdish society 'from top to bottom' would require building a new Kurdish identity and person-hood.

Gradually, notions like 'humanization', 'socialization' and 'liberated personality' replaced marxist notions of classes and class-struggle. When in Öcalan's recent writing names of classes still appear, they function as synonyms for political opponents (feudal for Kurdish clan-leaders, petty-bourgeois for non-PKK Kurdish groups) whose determining characteristic is often their 'distorted' or 'sick' personalities. Time and time again, Öcalan attacks the 'diseased' personalities of people who disagree with him.

The PKK's 1995 congress marked an ideological renovation. The theme of building the 'new man' was officially incorporated into party-ideology and the new program defined the goal as 'a personality that, with great foresight, great understanding, with great effort and determination, seeks to conquer every obstacle and turn the negative into the positive; a personality whose strong willpower fascinates under all circumstances and who for the

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<sup>2</sup> Olivier Grojean, 'The production of the new man within the PKK', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2012). Online at [<http://ejts.revues.org/4925>] p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds*, p. 91.

would play important roles. When this did not happen, and the trotskyist movement remained small and isolated, Bookchin started to reconsider his ideas. Bookchin gave up on Marxism, which in his eyes had made a fundamental mistake in seeing the working class as the revolutionary subject, but remained anti-capitalist.

It was clear for him that capitalism was a destructive system that had to be abolished. Its weak point, Bookchin reasoned, was not the contradiction capital-labor, but the contradiction capital-ecology. Capital, endlessly accumulating, destroys the environment. The struggle to save the eco-system takes on an anti-capitalist character and can unite everybody who see their lives threatened by the deterioration of the natural environment and who rebel against their alienation from it.

To construct an ecologically sustainable society, Bookchin suggested, cities would need to be de-centralized and scaled back to allow people to use renewable energy, grow food locally and cut expenditures of energy on transport. These smaller cities would be governed by assemblies of their populations who would democratically make decisions. Bookchin is often called an anarchist but he did not reject participation in elections and the existing political structures the way many anarchists do. Instead, he favored the combination of social movements and cooperatives that would prefigure the future society with participation in local city-councils to gain vested, legal political power.

This is the strategy the Kurdish movement now seems to be applying with some success in eastern Turkey. In cities and villages where the legal Kurdish party HDP has won enough support in the councils, state-resources are used to facilitate councils and neighborhood associations that are set up by the population in cooperation with various movements and NGO's. In this way, the movement hopes to build 'democratic autonomy', the power to locally make decisions in assemblies and councils, while 'evading' the central, Turkish-chauvinist state. Öcalan and the PKK see this as a way

to make authoritative ideological statements. In these statements, Öcalan often returns to the mythical past. Öcalan claims the PKK's struggle is only the latest Kurdish rebellion against centralized state-power. In a remarkable example of 'auto-orientalism', the Kurds are presented as a people without history that since Sumerian times (4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE) have rebelled against state-power, all the while remaining 'at essence' the same. The 'original sin' that caused their oppression was the formation of the state as such, against which the Kurds tried to preserve their 'natural' free culture. Öcalan describes his goal as a 'renaissance' of the idealized society that during the Neolithic supposedly existed in what is now Kurdistan. In a kind of *Aufhebung*, the positive aspects of this mythic past – a central role for women in society, a 'pure' Kurdish identity, social egalitarianism – are to return in a modern form and become a guiding example for the entire regime.

This renaissance is supposed to be realized in three intertwined projects: democratic republic, democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism.<sup>8</sup> The 'democratic republic' entails a reform of the Turkish state. Similar to the kind of statements Öcalan was making in the years before his arrest, the call is for Turkey to recognize the existence of minorities, especially Kurds, among its population and to dissociate citizenship from the Turkish ethnicity. This theme is prominent in Öcalan's defenses for the court.

Democratic autonomy is a concept borrowed from Murray Bookchin (1921 – 2006), a US libertarian socialist and theoretician. After a brief period as a Stalinist in his teenage years, Bookchin joined the Trotskyist movement in the late thirties and became a member of the Socialist Workers Party. Like many trotskyists, Bookchin had expected the Second World War to end with a wave of social revolutions, led by the working class, in which trotskyists

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, 'Reassembling the political: the PKK and the project of radical democracy', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2012). Online at [<http://ejts.revues.org/4615>]. p. 6.

struggle for development of humanity, without seeking personal benefits, even gives his life'.<sup>4</sup> 'Socialization of people' was now declared to be essential to socialism.<sup>5</sup>

The creation of the new man played a central role in the critique the PKK tried to formulate of 'really-existing socialism' after its collapse and of the new vision of socialism it tried to elaborate. The PKK did not regret the collapse of the Soviet bloc; 'we mourn the collapsed not so much, because we rather experience the relieve from a burden', Öcalan stated in 1992.<sup>6</sup> The 1995 program defined 'really existing socialism' as the 'lowest and most brutal stage of socialism', and explains its defects as such; 'in the ideological aspect a descend into dogmatism, vulgar materialism, and great-Russian chauvinism; in the political aspect the creation of an extreme centralism, the freezing of democratic class struggle and raising the interests of the state to be only decisive factor; in the social aspect the restriction of the free and democratic life of society and the individual; in the economic aspect the dominance of the state sector and not overcoming a consumption society that emulates foreign countries; finally in the military aspect the prioritizing of the army and weaponry over all other fields'. The way the PKK thought these failings could be avoided by a new socialism was by building the new man.

In the mid-nineties, the PKK emphasized its differences with really existing socialism as it tried to formulate its own distinctive ideology. In 1993, Öcalan claimed that the PKK, when it discussed 'scientific socialism' did not refer to marxism but to its own peculiar ideology of a 'socialism' that supposedly 'exceeds the interests of states, the nation and classes'.<sup>7</sup> Symbolically, the 1995 congress removed the hammer and sickle from the party flag; 'the hammer and sickle in really existing socialism only involved the class of

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<sup>4</sup> Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> PKK, Programm, Utrecht 1995. No page numbers.

<sup>6</sup> Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 77.

workers and peasants, and is with this also an expression of really existing socialism. The new conception of socialism is about the whole of humanity'.<sup>8</sup> The claim to be fighting for 'the whole of humanity' remains a frequent trope in PKK and PYD statements.

The PKK's alternative to the collapsed Soviet-model was a socialism of the new man: creating this new personality was the goal of socialism and the only guarantee that even after a revolution, society won't regress into capitalism or fascism. This 'socialism' was not a way of organizing society into 'an association of free human beings which works with common means of production', as Marx put, it but the creation of certain personalities. This is why, in a text from this period by Mehmet Can Yüce, which is otherwise rigidly 'marxist-leninist', he can also talk about 'the socialism that *has been* realized in the party',<sup>9</sup> just like the 1995 program does.<sup>10</sup> Yüce writes; 'If socialism does not dominate in the personality of the individual and in the relations inside the organization, it can not arise in society, respectively in the social system'.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of people 'remoulding' their personalities to become revolutionaries is not unique to the PKK. In the maoist Communist Party of the Philippines it was a recurring theme that to become truly proletarian revolutionaries, members had to 'remould' themselves to lose so-called 'petty-bourgeois' habits. But the PKK went much further: people were not only expected to become good party-members but to change their whole personality. The idea of creating a new man brings to mind Che Guevara's writing about socialism and human personality or the Soviet discourse about the socialist new man. The crucial difference is that the PKK claimed to be creating this new man already before revolution, and that through sheer determination and hard work, the socialist 'superman' would be created in the bases of the PKK.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Yüce, Gedanken, p. 79. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> PKK, Programm, Utrecht 1995. No page numbers.

<sup>11</sup> Yüce, Gedanken, p. 79.

fense plea as the new party manifesto or 'Second Manifesto'. In their book '*PKK. Perspektiven des kurdischen Freiheitkampfes: Zwischen Selbstbestimmung, EU und Islam*', Nikolaus Brauns and Brigitte Kiechle write; 'Öcalan's authority was so great, that the PKK presidium, whether it liked it or not, had to take this step if it didn't want to lose its influence over the party or even be branded as traitors'.<sup>6</sup> Captured or not, Öcalan remained the önderlik.

Öcalan's new orientation, now made party policy, was unacceptable even for many previously loyal followers of Apo. Thousands left the movement.<sup>7</sup> A small number of PKK-leaders unsuccessfully opposed the new orientation and the end of the armed struggle that was officially adopted at the PKK's seventh congress of February 2000. Leading figures like Meral Kidir, general secretary of DHP (Revolutionary Peoples Party), an off-shoot of the PKK, and Mehmet Can Yüce criticized the new orientation from the jails where they were held by the Turkish state. A DHP statement responded by declaring; 'Liquidation and provocations, which were all smashed until today, cannot succeed. The fate of provocations and liquidation which is imposed will be the same.' After the seventh party-congress, *Serxwebun* threatened the dissidents with the 'most severe punishment' under 'conditions of war'. The dissidents were unable to formulate any other alternative except a continuation of the failed people's war strategy and were quickly sidelined. As a sign of goodwill, Öcalan ordered the PKK guerrillas to withdraw from Turkish territory. Many of them were killed as the Turkish army attacked the retreating fighters.

In the period 1999 – 2005, the PKK was in shock, grappling with Öcalan's capture and trying to re-organize without the *Serok* and in accordance with his new instructions.

Since the Second Manifesto, even though he is depended on his jailers for information about the outside world, Öcalan continues

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<sup>6</sup> Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus, Blood and Belief, p. 291.

countries a 'determined democracy' developed and that this led to the 'supremacy of the west', 'Western civilization can, in this sense, be termed democratic civilization'.<sup>2</sup> What Turkey and the Kurds needed was 'Western-style problem solving'.<sup>3</sup> And in 2011; 'In principle, the western democratic system – which has been established through immense sacrifices – contains everything needed for solving social problems'. 'Europe, its [referring to 'democracy'] birth-place has by and large left nationalism behind in view of the wars of the twentieth century and established a political system adhering to democratic standards. This democratic system has already shown its advantages over other systems – including real socialism – and is now the only acceptable system worldwide'.

In his court statements, Öcalan presented the most intensive phase of the war as a mishap; 'Turkey failed to have a democratic system due to a lack of conviction, serious efforts and a true understanding of democracy (as opposed to demagoguery)' and this led to the outbreak of armed resistance.<sup>4</sup> But, Öcalan stated, the PKK's armed struggle in the nineties was wrong; 'In Turkey in the nineties, together [for Kurds and Turks] there were positive developments in human rights. After this the uprising was wrong. There was a way of solving the problem'.<sup>5</sup> Here Öcalan was talking about the period in which he, as absolute leader of the movement, had ordered the PKK to go on the offensive and branded cadres who wanted to shift attention away from the armed aspect of the struggle as traitors.

After the capture of Öcalan, the PKK-presidium declared that he is 'our leader but he is captured. His directions are no longer binding'. For an underground movement, this was a common sense statement to make but the PKK quickly made a u-turn; in July an enlarged meeting of the central committee adopted Öcalan's de-

<sup>2</sup> Öcalan, Declaration on the Democratic Solution, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Öcalan, Declaration on the Democratic Solution, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus, Blood and Belief, p. 248.

It was not only socialism as a social-economic system that was gradually pushed aside by this socialism of the new man. Something similar happened in PKK statements about Kurdish self-determination. In the second half of the eighties, the PKK would mention less and less the goal of a 'independent and united Kurdistan', instead talking about a 'Free Kurdistan', a formulation that leaves more ambiguity about the political goal.

Terms like 'freedom' and 'independence' were used more and more to talk about individual, 'spiritual' goals, referring to this new personality, instead of to statehood. This theme became especially strong in Öcalan's statement before the court in 1999, partly published as 'Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question' and in the prison writings. In these texts, Öcalan claimed that already before his imprisonment he used terms like 'freedom' and 'self-determination' mainly to refer to individuals, and not peoples. He even claimed that the PKK was never secessionist, a statement that contradicts the vehement insistence from 1978 that anything less than an independent Kurdistan (specified to be under occupation from Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) would be betrayal. Despite the other ideological renovations, the 1995 program insisted that an independent Kurdish state was the final goal of the movement.

Öcalan would after 1993, when the PKK made a cease-fire offer to the Turkish state, start to talk about a political settlement to the conflict and declared a break-up of the Turkish state was not a precondition to such a settlement. But this didn't exclude the possibility that an independent (and 'socialist') Kurdish state would remain the final goal, one that could possibly be fought for with other means than armed struggle. This is certainly how many PKK-members and supporters read these declarations. When shortly before his capture Öcalan was declaring that a 'democratic alternative' could be achieved on the basis of Turkish recognition of the Kurdish identity, a federated parliament and within the existing borders of Turkey, he was contradicting the PKK's official program.

When in 1999 Öcalan in his defense speech emphatically denied the goal of a Kurdish state, even in the long run, thousands of PKK-supporters left in disillusionment.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marcus, Blood and belief, p. 291.

recognize the existence of the Kurds and respect basic democratic rights like freedom of speech and the use of the Kurdish language. This would supposedly suffice to make Turkey into a democratic society that could transcend the conflict; 'I wish to emphasize that it [meaning 'democracy'] transcends tension and conflict with a wonderful balance. That it has ideal governments which, thanks to the suitability of democratic state institutions for such a purpose, can offer a solution without allowing different kinds of politics and the forces behind these to come into conflict'.<sup>1</sup>

An ideologeme that recurs since the 'Declaration on the Democratic Settlement' is that of 'democratic civilization', which the PKK now declares to be its goal. In this text, Öcalan explained he took the term from a 1964 book by US sociologist Leslie Lipson: a study of the development of the parliamentary system in western societies. In his recent prison writings, the term takes center-place, now without being credited. What exactly this 'democratic civilization' is for Öcalan remains unclear.

But it is clear Öcalan, at the latest beginning with the 'Declaration on the Democratic Settlement', became an admirer of western parliamentary democracy. In it he repeatedly refers to it as a model for Turkey. The statement contained long quotes from Lipson describing the political system of Switzerland which Öcalan used as an example of how in a single country, different social-cultural groups can live together. According to Öcalan, this could be an example for Turkish-Kurdish co-existence in a single state. Later, Öcalan became an enthusiastic supporter of Turkey joining the European Union, hoping this would force Turkey to introduce democratic reforms that would bring closer the 'democratic republic'.

The democracy Öcalan praises is often equated with the parliamentary, capitalist states of the West: he claims that in European

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<sup>1</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question, London 1999. p. 71.



## 6. Democratic Civilization

The PKK started to develop its own peculiar ideology in the late eighties and in the mid-nineties a number of ideological inventions had become part of the official policy. After his capture however Öcalan would accelerate the PKK's ideological metamorphosis. In the hands of the Turkish state, Öcalan started to make statements from jail through his lawyers. He praised his prison conditions and called on the PKK to hold on to the cease-fire it had declared the previous September and declared that negotiations with the Turkish state would continue – through him personally.

Öcalan's subsequent statements before the court came as a shock. Öcalan drastically reinterpreted the history and the ideology of the PKK. In court, Öcalan expressed regret over the death of Turkish soldiers and when the court asked if it would be correct to transcribe his words as an apology, he did not disagree. Öcalan did not mention the suffering of the Kurds but did find time to praise Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish republic, and referred to the cooperation of Kurds and Turks in the independence war in the early twenties. He claimed that if only Ataturk's ideas had been faithfully followed, there would have been no 'Kurdish question'.

It was not only history that was revised by Öcalan. He insisted that the goal of an independent Kurdish state was impossible, even in the long term, and that this was not even desirable. Even the ideas of Kurdish autonomy or a federative parliament, which Öcalan had suggested shortly before his capture, went out of the window. The 'democratic solution' that Öcalan instead proposed in his defense plea published as 'Declaration on the Democratic Settlement of the Kurdish Settlement' was that Turkey would

## 4. Serok Apo

In the eighties, Öcalan consolidated his control over the movement. After a power struggle in the early eighties, which ended with the death or flight of his rivals, 'Apo', a diminutive of Abdullah and meaning 'uncle' in Kurdish, consolidated his control over the organization. Officially the chair of the party, *Serok Apo* (leader Apo) became not only a political leader but also the military commander, the movements' 'philosopher' and a prophet-like figure. 'One person represents the new upright posture, practically the resurrection of a nation. My role is indeed that of a prophet, speaking to an enslaved, mercilessly oppressed people', Öcalan declared in 1992; 'we have to fight for our freedom ourselves. I symbolize this fight'.<sup>1</sup> The ideological publications of the PKK consist almost completely of texts by Öcalan. Only a few other prominent figures of the party published books and those are often memoirs. At party meetings, Öcalan would deliver speeches, without notes, that lasted for hours and were then transcribed and published as books, even telephone conversations were recorded to be 'studied'. In PKK jargon, Öcalan's statements are known as 'analyses' (*çözümlemeler*).

In the PKK, all members were expected to be completely dedicated to the party and in turn this came to mean complete dedication to Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan himself was referred to as *Önderlik* (leadership), 'guide' and even 'Sun'. In a sympathetic account of her time in the PKK-guerrilla, German internationalist Anja Flach wrote; 'the status of the party-leadership [meaning Öcalan] is an

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<sup>1</sup> Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, p. 66.

institution, he doesn't so much represent the party, as he is the party'.<sup>2</sup> An author who experienced Öcalan as leader in this period later wrote; 'Öcalan was not willing to share his authority. He demanded absolute submission to his person from the people in his surrounding and unrelentingly pushed this through.'<sup>3</sup>

Opposition to Öcalan and his decisions was impossible and the PKK would pay a heavy price for this as its fortunes on the battleground declined. In the late eighties and early nineties, the Turkish army was gaining more experience in fighting against guerrillas, using sophisticated equipment like Israeli supplied night-vision goggles and US combat helicopters. In addition, the Turkish state viciously targeted civilian supporters of the PKK and of Kurdish rights in general. Between 1984 and 1999 up to 40.000 people were killed. According to the Turkish army, they lost almost 6500 soldiers until 2008 and killed 32.000 PKK-members but those figures are not credible. According to the PKK, their losses were much smaller but the total number of casualties of the conflict must be much higher.

Both sides, but overwhelmingly the Turkish state, targeted civilians suspected of aiding the enemy. Jandarma İstihbarat ve Terörle Mücadele (JİTEM), a branch of the Turkish gendarmerie that officially did not even exist, was according to the Turkish Human Rights association IHD involved in 5.000 unsolved killings of journalists, intellectuals, human rights and political activists, and responsible for 1.500 'disappearances'. Turkish intelligence services also cooperated with right-wing and islamist militia that made thousands of casualties, most of them civilians. In the late eighties, the Turkish army started to forcibly remove Kurdish villagers to separate the guerrillas from civilian supporters. Estimations of the number of people displaced vary from 275.000 to 2 million. With much of its civilian support removed in this way,

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<sup>2</sup> Anja Flach, *Jiyaneke din – ein anderes Leben*, Hamburg 2011. p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Çelik, *Den Berg Ararat versetzen*, p. 47.

Turkish state and feudal rulers dominate the Kurdish people. On the other hand, the family is seen as the cradle from which a new Kurdish society should be born since the family plays such an important role in socializing people, in 'creating personalities', and this is at the center of the PKK's vision of liberation. Thus it is women, as mothers and educators, who are given a primary responsibility in deciding the outcome of the struggle.

Women are considered to be in the vanguard of the liberation struggle but to be able to play this role, they first have to liberate themselves from what is called their 'slave mentality'. Setbacks for the movement become then the responsibility of women who have failed to play their role. Liberation and the 'top to the bottom' reorganization of Kurdish society that the PKK set itself as a goal are now considered to be impossible if women are not liberated and in fact, it is women who should play a pioneering role in this social transformation.

domination over women, in sexual domination. This is a dominion of crude power; I found it foul, and I shattered it.'

Again, the PKK's idea of creating a new man, and a new woman, proves to be a powerful ideological tool. An important difference between the PKK's theory of women's oppression and liberation and that of Friedrich Engels is their neglect of social-economic factors. Engels argued that with the rise of social classes came a division of labor that relegated women's labor, and hence their social status, to a secondary position. In the PKK, the emphasis is instead (again) on issues like 'mentality' and 'personality'; women's oppression is supposedly rooted in patriarchal attitudes that are transferred from generation and that are internalized by women. To liberate themselves, women need to unlearn these attitudes just as much as men, and this way men and women are created anew.

The PKK discourse on women's liberation sees the category of women as superseding political differences. As the PJA stated; 'The women's liberation ideology is an alternative for all previous world-views, whether right-wing or left-wing. It is also a result of the critique of these ideologies. Because all previous ideologies as they were classified as either capitalist or socialist in the last centuries, have a masculine shape. Meaning, they have been shaped by patriarchy that since 5000 years has institutionalized itself in all fields of life'.<sup>9</sup>

The PKK's thinking is strongly essentialist. Women and nature are often equated, and following this, 'woman' is identified with motherhood. Women are assumed to have certain characteristics as women, such as empathy, an abhorrence of violence and a closeness to nature. These qualities need to be taught to men so that patriarchal society can be overcome.

These ideas put a heavy burden on women. On the one hand, the traditional family is criticized as a space in which patriarchal attitudes oppress women and as an institution through which the

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<sup>9</sup> Brauns & Kiechle, PKK, p. 247.

and under increasingly heavy attack, the PKK started to suffer military setbacks in the mid-nineties.

But Öcalan refused to listen to warnings from field-commanders and insisted they should go on the offensive. A 1994 statement claimed 'the struggle which the PKK carries out has left the stage of strategic defense [...]. It is inevitable that we escalate our struggle in response to Turkey's declaration of all-out war.' Setbacks were not blamed on the faulty instructions from 'the leadership' but on the failure of commanders to correctly carry them out. Flach described 'criticism and self-criticism' sessions she witnessed in this period; 'failures were seen primarily in the personalities of the commanders and the fighters. Structures from the old life [before the guerrilla] are still lived, feudal or petty-bourgeois attitudes and views are not superseded and exactly this is seen as the most important obstacle to implementing the ideas of the party'.<sup>4</sup> But the validity of these ideas themselves was not put into question.

The PKK's idea of creating a 'New Man' was a powerful means of control as the ideal incorporated unquestioning obedience – and criticism of the 'leadership' was seen as proof of failing to achieve this goal. Öcalan was more than a distinguished or even indispensable leader, he himself, his person, was built up to be indispensable to the liberation of the Kurdish people. As a critical observer noted his role; 'he alone "is" the key to liberation – as opposed to just possessing it'.<sup>5</sup> This also explains why even after his capture Öcalan remained the leader of the movement.

In 1998 Turkey threatened Syria with war if it continued to shelter the PKK leader. The Syrian regime ordered Öcalan to leave and in October 1998 he left the country. For 130 days Öcalan went from country to country looking for asylum. He intensified his calls for a political settlement and declared the PKK would accept a 'democratic republic'; a united Turkey that would guarantee freedom of

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<sup>4</sup> Flach, *Jiyaneke din*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Grojean, 'The production of the new man within the PKK'. p. 9.

speech for the Kurds and recognize the presence of a Kurdish minority. Öcalan said the PKK was ready to lay down arms of those conditions were met. In February 1999 Öcalan was captured by Turkish agents.

scarified themselves in suicide attacks, in a region that has had a tradition of women choosing suicide to escape their unhappy situation.<sup>7</sup>

The new role of women led to changes in the ideology and organization of the PKK. In the guerrilla, independent women's units were formed and later an independent women's army – a practice that was also adopted by the Syrian Kurdish movement when it organized the YPJ (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê*, Women's Protection Units). The motivation is that in this way women are freed from the sexist practices of male comrades and at the same time forced to break with traditional notions of female obedience and servility and instead assume leadership roles. The same principle was applied in the political organizations. In 1994 the Free Women's Movement of Kurdistan, later renamed as Free Women's Union of Kurdistan (YAJLK), was formed. After Öcalan's capture, the organization was dissolved and later reformed as the Party of Free Women (PJA). In all mixed PKK-organs a mandatory gender quota exists. The leaderships have to include at least 40 per cent women, executive posts are double functions of one man and one woman. The PYD for example has two chairs: Salim Muslim and Asya Abdullah, who stayed in Kobani during the siege.

Handan Çağlayan describes one change in Öcalan's texts on women as such; 'in the 1980s, Öcalan spoke to militant men about how they should treat women, that is, he spoke with men about women; in the 1990s, however, he spoke with women militants about men, and drew attention to the significance of this'.<sup>8</sup> Öcalan in 1999: 'Man at hand was analyzed, and it was seen that man is the main problem. [...] For me, the Man Question is now prior to the Woman Question. Does being man equals being in power? I ask men: If you have power, then why can't you show this in the most elementary problem of war? He proves his manhood by

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<sup>8</sup> Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess' p. 13.

were fueled by a new sense of Kurdish identity and strength that had been made possible by the armed struggle. These protests involved layers of the population that were not in direct contact with the PKK guerrilla's units in the mountains but nevertheless sympathized with them. Especially the Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations of 1990, 1991, and 1992 were important as they turned into confrontations with Turkish security forces. Women participated massively in these protests, confronting security forces in the streets.

The protests were repressed but in their aftermath, the Kurdish movement became a truly popular mass movement, involving student organizations, cultural associations, publications, women's groups and other initiatives. The PKK was the hegemonic force in this movement but at the same time struggled to integrate the many new recruits that often came from very different social backgrounds than the old guard. Dozens of these often young, educated volunteers were executed by PKK commanders who mistrusted them or felt that their power was being challenged.

But the influx of new members did change the party. As the participation of women in the guerrilla increased, the movement was forced to confront persisting sexist ideas and practices. Women refused to have their roles in the movement limited to that of providing support, instead choosing to fight as part of the guerrilla.

The party soon discovered the emotional appeal of images of young female fighters that had abandoned their homes and old lives to fight for the Kurdish cause. Martyred women became emotionally powerful symbols of the movement and still are, as the recent example of Arin [Mirkan] and other female fighters killed in the defense of Kobani show. The martyrs of the movement include women who set themselves on fire in protest or killed themselves in suicide attacks on the enemy, tactics that were adopted in the nineties. Distressingly, it were disproportionately women that

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus, Blood and belief, p. 244.

## 5. A revolution of women

Already in its first program, the PKK called for full equality of men and women in all social and political aspects, but this was little more than one clichéd demand among others, just below introducing the eight hour workday, if possible. The same program declared the national oppression of the Kurds to be the 'main contradiction' that the party should fight against. In 1987, the party organized the 'Union of Patriotic Women of Kurdistan' (*Yekitiya Jinen Welaparezen Kurdistan*, YJWK). Like the women's organizations of many other marxist-leninist parties, its original intention was facilitating the participation of women in the party, but it was also to provide a space to deal with specific women's issues.

The PKK's distinctive practice of women's liberation was developed in the second half of the nineties, when the active participation of women in the Kurdish movement, both as politicians and as fighters, increased.<sup>1</sup> But, like on any other issue in the PKK, the ideological guide on the issue of women's liberation is Öcalan. Starting in the eighties, 'Öcalan's "analyses" increasingly criticized traditional patriarchal family structures, women's secondary status within the family, and the gender roles that associated women with *namus* [the control over women's sexuality] and assigned men the duty to protect it.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Handan Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in post-1980 Turkey', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012). Online at [<http://ejts.revues.org/4657>] p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess', p. 8.

Today, it is in the field of women's liberation and gender equality that the PKK movement takes its most radical positions. One of the aspects that sets the struggle of the PKK apart from other Kurdish rebellions is the large participation of women in all levels of the movement. In a way, the category of 'women' has replaced that of 'the international proletariat' in the PKK ideology: today it is women as such who are assumed to be the vanguard of the struggle. The movement declared that its goal is not just the liberation of Kurdish women but of women worldwide.

The PKK's ideas on women's liberation are heavily influenced by the myth of a prehistoric matriarchal past during the neolithic, 'when the woman was a creating goddess' (Öcalan).<sup>3</sup> With the rise of class society, the oppression of women began. These notions are clearly taken from Friedrich Engels' 'The origin of the family, private property and the state'.

The patriarchal family structure and inequality between men and women, according to Öcalan and the PKK, serve the interests of the oppressive Turkish state and the 'feudal' Kurdish leaders that cooperate with it. This state and its puppets play a crucial role in perpetuating these inequalities by enforcing tribal traditions that block the development of Kurdish women and of society as a whole, thus controlling the Kurdish people. The traditional family oppresses women by blocking them from social life, and the family is protected through *namus*, surveillance of women's bodies, behaviors, and sexualities by men.<sup>4</sup> Öcalan: 'Since sexual motives are fundamental instincts, the problems thus created lead to profound political perversions. To resolve the sexual motives is to realize the greatest revolution. There is no one among us who has not yet realized this. Everyone succumbs. Kurdish society expresses an individual type and a social reality, which succumbs, more than any

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<sup>3</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, 'Jineoloji als Wissenschaft der Frau', Einleitende Worte der Herausgeberin, online at [<http://www.kurdistan-report.de/index.php/archiv/2014/172/110-jineoloji-als-wissenschaft-der-frau>].

<sup>4</sup> Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess', p. 2.

other society in the world, to instincts of hunger and sexuality. [...] Around these sexual motives are formed a certain *namus*, a certain understanding of morality, and no brave fellows have the power to overcome this. [...] In this bottleneck, our individual has lost once again, even before it reached the age of twenty.'<sup>5</sup>

Breaking the bonds that oppressed women would not only enable them to play an active role in the liberation movement, thereby strengthening it. Öcalan also assumed that women, as the victims of both national and gender oppression, are more receptive to radical ideas, more willing to challenge tradition and the status-quo; 'Today, during the Palestinian uprising, it is almost entirely women, children, and the youth with stones who carry out the revolution. There are lessons to take from this. [...] When women, who make up half of the society, take to the streets, it is impossible to control them [...]. In this respect, especially for improving the urban movement, we must take action in this next stage. [...] Certainly, all women are furious. All of them are hungry and impoverished. It is possible to make them into rebels by using all kinds of methods.'<sup>6</sup>

The liberation of women was and is seen as part of the liberation of the Kurdish people, but there has been a shift in how this relationship is conceived. In her article 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in post-1980 Turkey', Handan Çağlayan summarizes this change as one of talking *about* women, an instrumental view of seeing women as a resource for the revolution, to one of talking *to* women as actors in their own liberation. This shift took place in the second half of the nineties.

In the early nineties, the participation of women inside the PKK, including in its guerrilla units, increased dramatically. In these years, large protests broke out among the Kurdish population, the *Serhildan*, also sometimes known as the Kurdish *intifada*, that

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<sup>5</sup> Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess', p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.