

Manufactured ignorance

The strange case of Juan Cole and the Kurdish Freedom Movement, and the International Liberal Intelligentsia

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This is a story about how a well-meaning liberal American professor can end up becoming an active propagandist for right-wing forces attempting to destroy a feminist revolution.

Juan Cole is a Professor of History at the University of Michigan, well-known for his blog *Informed Comment*, which has provided detailed background and analysis on Middle Eastern affairs to a largely university-based audience since 2002. Politically a Sanders Democrat, he appears to operate within that sector of the progressive elite that overlaps with the DC political establishment and therefore exists in at least the same intellectual, social, and professional circuits (i.e., attends the same cocktail parties as members of what is delicately referred to as “the intelligence community.”

What follows might then be read as a study in the moral perils of what can happen when scholars come to operate too closely to circuits of power. It bears in it lessons of no small relevance to anthropologists.

Cole approaches contemporary Middle Eastern politics from what is often described as an anti-imperialist perspective—though he has been known to depart from it in specific instances (he supported NATO intervention in Libya). Much of the power of his analysis lies in his willingness to carefully pick through Turkish-, Arabic-, and Persian-language opinion pieces and news sources, and to examine the social and class basis of Islamist social movements like Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Iraqi Sadrists. Still, an anti-imperialist optic seems, oddly, much closer to an imperialist one than that of someone who is doing something else entirely; like the legates of empire he criticizes, Cole seems to share an instinctual sympathy for “moderate Islamist” strongmen, and an equally instinctual antipathy to anyone in his chosen area of study who purports to share his own left-wing commitments.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in his limitless animus against Turkey’s Kurdish Worker’s Party, or PKK, and any other element of the larger Kurdish Freedom Movement of which the PKK is a part. For almost 20 years, they have been trying to “change the game,” as it were, from a story about empire and resistance to empire, to one where the Middle East should be, rather than a plaything of strongmen and would-be strongmen, the birthplace of a new phase in the history of democracy and women’s rights.

Some background: around 2000, the PKK, a Marxist rebel group that had been fighting a long guerrilla war for a separate Kurdish state, began to undergo a profound ideological transformation. Sparked in part by the evolution of the ideas of imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan—partly, too, by the efforts of women’s groups within the movement—the PKK abandoned Marxism-Leninism and turned to libertarian socialism with a focus on overthrowing patriarchy. It also abandoned any call for a separate Kurdish state for a call to develop a multiethnic, ecologically conscious society based on principles of confederal direct democracy inspired in part by the ideas of the American anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin. Inspired by the example of the Mexican Zapatistas, they pledged not just not to target civilians, but not to carry out offensive actions against Turkish security forces, asking for a ceasefire and peace negotiations aimed at a general decentralization and democratization of Turkish society as a whole. Principles of democratic confederalism and equal women’s representation in all political offices were adopted across the broader Kurdish movement, including HDP (the largely Kurdish-based left political party in Turkey), PYD in Syria, and allied groups in Iraq and Iran.

The Turkish response was to lobby to have the PKK placed on the US, Australian, Canadian, and EU “terror” lists, which they had not been before, and—though Erdogan did make a brief strategic gesture at negotiations—to use the “terrorist” designation as a pretext for rounding up thousands of activists, journalists, and elected officials who tried to pursue the new strategy of trying to build alternative democratic structures, many of whom were systematically raped and tortured in detention.

Some years later, in Syria in 2012, events took a very different course. In the largely Kurdish-speaking northern cantons of Cezire, Kobane, and Afrin (collectively referred to as Rojava), the movement managed to negotiate a general withdrawal of Syrian government forces (government officials, and oligarchs close to the regime, almost all took off as well). Kurdish revolutionaries suddenly had a space to be able to realize their dream of democratic confederalism. This happened, however, in a tense relation with other areas in rebellion. While in the early days of the Syrian revolution, Arab communities too created directly democratic councils, many on a model inspired by a Syrian anarchist named Omar Aziz, the militarization of the conflict had very different effects; where in the Kurdish areas, the revolutionaries created their own militias, the People’s Protection Forces (YPG) and the Women’s Protection Forces (YPJ), most of the secular, left revolutionary organizations in the rest of Syria made a conscious decision not to join the armed struggle, leaving that to military defectors who made up the Free Syrian Army, then, increasingly, to Islamist militias armed and supplied by outside powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. There were tensions between the two forces, especially over the YPG/J’s decision not to conduct offensive operations against the Syrian government but simply to protect the social experiments in its own territories. This, already, took a great deal of effort, however, as Islamists allied—openly or tacitly—with Turkey soon began launching major unprovoked assaults on Rojava, culminating in the famous siege of Kobane. International pressure gradually forced the United States to aid the YPG/J, which ultimately agreed to take the battle home to root out ISIS from the entirety of Syria, in the process, spreading the confederalist model and feminist mobilization well beyond Kurdish-majority territories, through about two-fifths of Syrian territory, in what’s now called the Democratic Confederation of North Syria—somewhat bizarrely, working in coordination with some two thousand US troops.

This is the kind of information one might have imagined would feature prominently in a blog ostensibly intended to disentangle events in the region for a left-of-center, largely university-

based Western audience. But one can search in vain for virtually any of it in Juan Cole's blog. After his initial accounts of the Arab Spring, the revolutionary infrastructure in Arab areas—and the intriguing fact that in many areas, it has managed to coexist with Islamist militias—disappears. The treatment of the Kurdish movement, on the other hand, crosses the line from mere neglect to active hostility. This is especially directed against the PKK. While Cole made a point of describing Sunni rebels opposing the US occupation in Iraq, even those who placed bombs in marketplaces frequented by rival ethnic groups, as “guerrillas” he never referred to the PKK, who are fighting a classic guerrilla insurgency and never make such attacks, as anything but “terrorists.” Frequently, these denunciations slip into what appear to be simple fabrications, exemplified in statements such as “The PKK waged a dirty war in the 1970s-1990s and was guilty of massive war crimes, and is still a ruthless and brutal purveyor of terror.”

While the first statement is contestable, to say the least, the second is simply untrue, and in the particular blog post linked above, five different commenters demanded Professor Cole give at least one example of a recent PKK attack on a civilian target. He ignored all of them. (The very fact that they remained up was somewhat anomalous; Cole systematically censors comments that challenge his editorial decisions on such issues, and preemptively blocks anyone on twitter who seems too sympathetic to the Kurdish left.) Cole's signature rhetorical move is false evenhandedness, such as, in the same piece:

Although the PKK is guilty of horrific acts of terrorism, Erdogan's military has sometimes besieged civilian Kurdish villages in the southeast (they are Turkish citizens). When dozens of Turkish academics signed a letter protesting these state tactics, they met with state harassment and some were even arrested (over what was essentially a petition).

If one knows anything of the real history, one cannot see paragraphs like this, coming from a world-renowned academic expert with long-standing knowledge and research interests in the region, as anything but calculated deception. These are the actual events being referred to, all of which would have been familiar to anyone following political events in Turkey, many of them widely reported in the press:

- In 2016, the HDP, the third largest party in Turkish Parliament, and legal political wing of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, swept local elections in much of the Turkish southeast. Many of its elected officials, including numerous mayors, and hundreds community organizers were subsequently arrested, beaten, tortured, or killed by Turkish security forces and allied fascist or Islamist death squads.
- Local youth groups in roughly a dozen Kurdish cities (not villages, *cities*) responded by voting to declare their municipalities self-governing on principles of democratic confederalism, took up arms and dug trench systems to defend their cities.
- Erdogan then ordered the army (and allied Islamist militias) to surround and besiege these cities, imposing 24-hour curfews that created mass starvation, and ultimately flattening city centers and many neighborhoods with artillery and helicopter gunships. Hundreds died.
- Suppression of the autonomous municipalities involved the widespread deployment of rape against female activists.

- The PKK’s role in the conflict was limited to: (1) having earlier provided supplies and training to the youth groups, (2) calling for peace talks to head off armed conflict before the Turkish attack, and (3) descending, once the attacks began, from the mountains to make a largely unsuccessful military attempt to break the sieges.
- As these events unfolded, more than two thousand Turkish academics presented a petition demanding the government negotiate rather than attack its own population; hundreds of these signatories have since been purged from their jobs, most were threatened, attacked, or arrested, and at least 148 face trial for “terrorist propaganda.”

If one rereads Cole’s above-quoted passage with all this in mind (and Cole was certainly in a position to know all of this), we can see what a calculated act of dissimulation it really was. He clearly wants to write in such a way as to provoke mild sympathy among his audience for his fellow academics but, at the same time, to make the Turkish government’s actual “horrific acts of terrorism” (to use his own words in an appropriate context) and the destruction of Kurdish cities as palatable as possible to an audience of liberal intellectuals—in this case, largely by obfuscating and in some cases completely reversing the actual events.

Such interventions are political acts—just as is the piece you are reading now—and all the more so in a context rife with censorship. Turkey by now has more journalists in prison than any other country on Earth. Crucially, the fact that the PKK is listed as a “terror group” means that, whatever its behavior, false statements about it will always pass unchecked in the mainstream media, but even accurate statements that contradict the terror narrative are well-nigh impossible to publish.

The fact that it was the PKK (and the YPG) who fought their way through ISIS lines to rescue the Yazidis of Mount Sinjar from genocide, when no one else was willing to intervene, is largely ignored by Western journalists. This suppression extends to the Kurdish movement more generally: I myself had visited some of the Turkish cities in question in 2015, just before the army attacks began, and while they were happening wrote a piece clarifying the background—yet found myself incapable of finding a single American or European newspaper willing to run with it. To this day, almost no one outside Turkey is aware any of these events even took place.

Clearly, the brave Turkish academics who signed the petition did so hoping that people like Cole would report *why* they did it, and that outrage among precisely the very sort of people who read Cole’s blog (call them, if you like, the international liberal intelligentsia...) would then lead to pressure on Erdogan’s government to return to peace talks. By strategically—and consistently—misrepresenting the situation to that very audience, Professor Cole appears to be intentionally trying to ensure the efforts of those Turkish academics were in vain. Again, it seems extremely unlikely that Cole was somehow unaware that, as he wrote, a dozen Turkish cities lay in ruins. What were his motives in representing things as other than they were?

The exact same game is now being played for the horrific events and mass murder now taking place in northern Syria, where the Turkish army has launched a full-scale invasion of the previously peaceful canton of Afrin, on the grounds that its defenders are “terrorists”—for no other reason than that they are part of the larger Kurdish movement that includes the PKK. Unprovoked military aggression, is of course, a war crime—“the supreme war crime,” according to the Nuremberg tribunal, as Cole himself so pointedly noted in his critique of the Rumsfeld memo that prepared the US for the invasion of Iraq—and the Turkish army is conducting the invasion using

not just Turkish troops but former ISIS and Al-Qaeda militiamen (along with FSA foot soldiers basically dragooned into the campaign against their will).

Again, this might seem to be just the sort of case where international outrage might be expected, and might actually have a positive effect. To draw international attention to the situation, the North Syria Confederation organized a solidarity march of Kurds, Arabs, and Yezidis, as well as Syriac, Armenian, and Assyrian Christians, from across the region. Here is how Cole chose report on this event. If nothing else it might serve as a handy guide for any reader who might at any point in the future be interested in justifying atrocities:

Image 1: Screenshot from Juan Cole’s blog (<https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/against-turkish-offensive.html>, accessed 11 February 2018).

The first clever move here is not to report an event, but to report a report of an event. The source is clearly unfriendly. But this allows Cole to leave the reader with the false impression that this is a purely Kurdish nationalist event, when the organizers intended the opposite. The final line that “it is alleged” that some protesters were Kurdish militia is also rather odd. In fact, both YPG/J volunteers from other parts of Syria, and Syriac Christian militia, have arrived in Afrin in recent days, but since the Syrian government is allowing safe passage there would be no reason for them to hide within a civilian march. Rather, the suggestion they might have been hiding reflects a recent Turkish propaganda line. Since Turkish army shelling and airstrikes against Afrin’s cities, towns, and villages have created hundreds of civilian casualties in Afrin, and photos of victims have begun to spark some international concern, the new line is that Kurdish militia are intentionally dressing in civilian clothes to fake such claims. The image of marchers with guns—invoked by this passage—is often used to reinforce this.

Image 2: Screenshot from Juan Cole’s blog (<https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/against-turkish-offensive.html>, accessed 11 February 2018).

Again, this passage is hard to understand except in the context of an ongoing info-war in which Cole, while apparently writing in a coolly evenhanded way, is, in fact, echoing another Turkish propaganda line. The Turkish public was prepared to believe the invasion would be a cakewalk, over in a matter of days. Eighteen days later, despite overwhelming advantage in numbers and technology (the Turkish army is in fact larger than the entire population of Afrin, and their troops can deploy hundreds of high-end German-manufactured tanks, fighter jets, and helicopter gunships), they have nowhere managed to advance more than roughly five or six kilometers into Democratic Federation of Syria territory, stopped in their tracks by determined male and female partisans armed with AK-47s and anti-tank missiles. Their response has been to insist the anti-tank missiles are supplied by the United States (in fact they appear to be Russian-made and bought or captured from other rebels). Even if these claims were true, however, they would be bizarre: US assurances that troops it armed would not be “deployed against” Turkey obviously referred to offensive actions, not that they would not be used to shoot back if Turkey launched an unprovoked attack against them. The article proceeds:

Image 3: Screenshot from Juan Cole’s blog (<https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/against-turkish-offensive.html>, accessed 11 February 2018).

Such criticism of Turkey is intended to create an impression of evenhanded neutrality, but in fact, considering the overwhelming evidence that Turkey was actively trading with Daesh,

and cooperating politically and militarily, it is at best extremely understated. This sort of gentle touch is, however, certainly not what Cole deploys when speaking of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria:

Image 4: Screenshot from Juan Cole's blog (<https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/against-turkish-offensive.html>, accessed 11 February 2018).

This passage is crucial largely for what it does not say. In fact, Afrin's total population had increased by 400,000 since the start of the war because it was an island of peace and stability, and most of those who fled there from other parts of Syria were not Kurdish. Cole seems to have felt the reader should not know this as it might undercut the tacit message that this is all about Kurdish nationalism.

Cole also wants to ensure the reader remains ignorant of almost anything else that might show Afrin in a favorable light: for instance, the fact that its previously peaceful conditions had allowed it to go furthest with Rojava's experiment in revolutionary feminism, to the point where two-thirds of all officeholders there are women. Or the fact that Rojava as a whole is conducting the most radical experiment in women's empowerment, perhaps, in history, and that this experiment is being attacked by overtly patriarchal Islamists partly for this very reason. One might be forgiven for thinking a "left" commentator on the region might find this fact, or the experiments with direct democracy, worthy of discussion; or at the very least, worthy of remark. But Cole is careful to ensure his readers are not privy to any of this information.

Image 5: Screenshot from Juan Cole's blog (<https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/against-turkish-offensive.html>, accessed 11 February 2018).

Here, Cole again employs the technique of the selective reporting of accusations (accusations against the YPG are regularly reproduced, with no comment on whether or not they ought to be credited; equivalent accusations against Turkey or FSA forces are simply not reported). Critical background is excluded: the fact, for instance, that the "Arab belt" populations between the three cantons that fear ethnic cleansing might do so largely because they are themselves mostly there as a result of Syrian government ethnic cleansing population against Kurds in the '50s and '60s, or that a UN investigation confirmed that, when the other two cantons (Cezire and Kobane) were united, no ethnic cleansing by YPG/J forces took place. Similarly, Manbij, a territory between Afrin and Kobane, was seized by the YPG from ISIS two years ago; even though it was a formerly Kurdish majority city that had been ethnically cleansed by the Syrian government in the '60s and then again by Daesh over the last several years, until Kurds had been reduced to a mere 5% of the population, "Kurdish rule" has seen its population swell dramatically as 120,000 mostly Arab refugees came to live there from other parts of Syria. This is the very opposite of ethnic cleansing.

In fact, the very existence of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, let alone the fact that it has put its model forward as a multiethnic democratic solution for all of Syria, or that it has nonetheless been excluded from official peace talks on Turkish insistence, is entirely left out Cole's account.

Finally, crucially, Cole uses the selective reporting trick to provide a pretext for Turkey's unprovoked attack: its claims that the YPG is attacking its cities. The reality according to virtual all foreign observers until now has been the exact opposite: Turkey has been periodically shelling

and bombing Afrin and other parts of Rojava for more than a year now, with the YPG refusing to take the bait and not returning fire.

Image 6: Screenshot from Juan Cole's blog (<https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/against-turkish-offensive.html>, accessed 11 February 2018).

As a summary of the war so far this is bizarre (in fact, the Turkish army had by that time failed to advance more than five kilometers into Afrin; the YPG/J had already released videos of as many as 20 armored vehicles destroyed or captured). The crucial thing to notice here though is how what were earlier reported as mere Turkish *accusations* of cross-border attacks has suddenly morphed into a flat-out a statement of fact. This rhetorical slippage is all the more striking considering, again, all the contextual information that's left out, such as:

(1) the fact that recordings have been released of Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkish intelligence, proposing faking just such cross-border missile attacks as a pretext for invasion, and considerable evidence the rocket attacks were indeed launched from the Turkish side, and

(2) the fact that there are no similar doubts about the reality of Turkish artillery and bombing attacks on civilian targets in Afrin. These latter have included attacks on villages, urban neighborhoods, dams, bakeries, and water filtration plants, which have caused hundreds of civilian casualties. The Turkish air force has even carried out an ISIS-like attack on a famous archaeological site, the Ain Dara Hittite temple complex, which, sitting alone in a desert far from any other conceivable target, appears to have been blown apart for no other reason than to destroy the region's cultural heritage.

(This latter might be of some interest to anthropologists. In fact, both sides of the conflict are fighting a mythic battle. Islamists, now including the Turkish army, which has been increasingly taken over by Islamist loyalists since the coup, take aim at ruins as vestiges of a pagan past. The Kurdish movement in particular treasures them for that very reason, seeing Kurds as descendants of the Neolithic, goddess-worshipping peoples of the region, and their revolution as the beginning of historical reversal of patriarchy in its birthplace. A YPJ statement responding to Turkey's Islamist auxiliaries' mutilation of the corpse of a female fighter declared, "This time, my sisters will make history. We will avenge our Goddess Tiamat and smash the legacy of Marduk.")

Not a single mention of any of these facts about Turkish bombing of civilian targets and past threats of false-flag attacks appears anywhere in Cole's piece, or in anything else he's written. The piece ends:

Image 7: Screenshot from Juan Cole's blog (<https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/against-turkish-offensive.html>, accessed 11 February 2018).

The conclusion, alas, rather gives the game away. "Some observers" is again bizarre, since Erdogan himself has stated he intends to take Afrin city. He has also declared that Kurds have historically only represented 35 percent of the Afrin population (a statement that seems to have no historical basis whatsoever) and that he intends to give the territory back to its "rightful owners," which has been taken by almost everyone else as public admission that ethnic cleansing is precisely what he has in mind. So, this is hardly something Cole just somehow figured out.

A radical feminist experiment in direct democracy, of world-historic significance, is currently being attacked by forces of the far-right intent on carrying out war crimes to suppress it. While the women and men defending Afrin have shown extraordinary tenacity in blunting the Turkish offensive, the only long-term chance they have of fending off the onslaught is to hold out

until global outrage forces world powers to withdraw their “green light” to Turkey’s military aggression. In this context, words are weapons. Erdogan’s regime is keenly aware of this and has showered untold millions on Western PR firms and influence peddlers to tar anyone associated with the Kurdish Freedom Movement as “terrorists.”

As intellectuals we are used to being relatively marginal players in the global game. This is one unusual situation where the role of intellectuals, and particularly the broad left intellectual public is potentially crucial. Our thoughts, our potential interventions, actually do matter. The Women’s Defense Forces for instance have declared that they are fighting for all women against patriarchy, but above all they have appealed to women’s movements across the world for support. Those trying to put the ideas of Murray Bookchin and other Western left libertarians into practice have similarly called for the solidarity of all those trying to broaden and deepen democracy. This is what makes projects like Cole’s Informed Comment so strategically important, and makes his systematic hostility to the women’s revolution beginning to take place in the Middle East so insidious. What he has effectively done in the piece above is produced an elaborate case for war crimes, dressed up to be palatable to an educated foreign public: if Erdogan’s army, and its allied Grey Wolf fascist death squads, and Salafist Jihadi militias, actually do manage to destroy Afrin’s feminist experiment, the men like Juan Cole will have played a key role in making it possible.

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