

Tekmil: A Tool For Collective Reflection

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What Is It

Tekmil is an instrument of collective reflection. The historical root of what we know as teknil can be traced to authoritarian communist traditions, such as Stalinism. Although, Mao was the first one among these traditions to put so much emphasis and importance to the methods of criticisms and self-criticism. Overall, we can state that critique and self-critique has been valuable for revolutionary movements in general, and has never been alien to non-authoritarian revolutionary movements in general.

In the context of Rojava, teknil can be translated as “report” – further, one can trace the development and transformation of this meaning depending on the situation. Still, the literal translation makes sense to keep in mind – humbleness and shortness are valued in teknil. It contains many cultural codes, mechanisms and ideological assumptions, and it requires an understanding and a solid philosophical and ideological foundation.

This article conveys a specific experience of the anarchist organization in Rojava and does not necessarily represent or extend to all other teknil practices in all revolutionary structures in Kurdistan and beyond. We do not want to give the impression that we “carry the most correct knowledge about teknil” and that we want to “tell you how it really works”. On the contrary, our position and experience are coming from and with humbleness, and we would like to share what we have learned through our interactions with the revolutionary movement in Northeastern Syria. It should be understood that this text is written through the lens of the internationalist anarchist organization in Rojava – we do not claim to have the most objective point of view, and our position also carries its own limitations. Our experiences may differ from what other internationalists have experienced in coming to learn about teknil in this context, as well as from those for whom Kurdistan and local languages and culture are native. What we can and do want is to share our own experiences and perspectives on teknil.

In the revolutionary structures of Kurdistan, teknil is used as a tool for collective reflection and analysis. Teknil evaluates socialization in our societies, the influence of capitalist and patriarchal mentality on our personalities, and deals with our actions, our approaches toward each other in the format of comradeship and collective living, and the ideas we want to put into practice. One of the main parts of teknil is criticism. In most communities where we come from, criticism is often perceived as an attack, or a negative statement. Teknil philosophy views criticism as a gift that comrades offer to one another with the best of intentions. From the perspective of such a philosophy, criticism is what allows us to grow as individuals, to work on our shortcomings – even though criticism can be very difficult to listen to and accept. Criticism may be difficult to express, too. The task of teknil is to bring us closer to the realization of our ideas within ourselves and around us, and move away from the mentality of capitalism and patriarchy. Instead of the latter, teknil helps to develop the mentality of people who struggle for liberation, and who aspire to be revolutionaries. That means changing the mindset and personality in accordance with the ideas we are fighting for.

A Brief History of Teknil

To understand how teknil evolved to its present form, we need to look at its history in the context of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party. Why are we talking about the PKK in this topic? We are

anarchists, and the party is not the organizing method of our movement. However, this does not take away the fact that there are lessons worth learning from the PKK's history for us as well.

The same can be said of any revolutionary movement in general. Moreover, PKK is not a party in the sense of participation in the organizational framework of the state, but it can be seen as a form of organization of an anti-state, anti-colonial struggle. PKK is not meant to be voted for, neither it tries to change the system from the inside.

The development of teknil as such, in the form that we observe it as internationalist anarchists in Rojava, is inseparably linked to the history of the development of the PKK. Therefore, to better understand teknil, it is useful to look at this part of history as well, however contradictory it may seem to us. Often, it is from contradictions that we can draw the most valuable lessons. Other cultures or movements are no strangers to the collective reflection. It has been used in various ways around the world, for example, the so-called "revision of life" in Catholic organizations in Catalonia, after the Spanish Civil War. Or the "talking stick" of the native peoples in colonized lands of so-called Americas. Processes of collective reflection are inherent in most communities in one form or another. The teknil we are now discussing can be assigned 4 stages of development, similarly related to the 4 stages of development of the PKK.

So, how did teknil develop in the PKK?

1973–1983 The form of teknil is unclear. Meetings were held. It was a time of developing organizational standards and systems.

1983–1993 The beginning of the armed conflict with Turkey, until the ceasefire. The basis of teknil existed, but military needs outweighed the necessary analytical and ideological work. A patriarchal mentality progressed.

1993 The first truce between the PKK and Turkey comes. The war had a toxic effect on organizational structures. The PKK focused on the development of organizational and political analysis. Autonomous women's structures were gradually developing. Men had great influence, the struggle as they understood it was often reduced to national liberation and a hard Marx-Leninist line. Women in the organization criticized the patriarchal approach and military thinking, and insisted on the development of analysis of personality and progress. From this time period we can quote something that was the ideological result of the debate and organizational work and became the famous quote, coming from the 5th Congress of the PKK in 1995: "5% of our struggle is against our enemy, 95% is against ourselves." The turning point was also the firm criticism of Marxism-Leninism.

1993–2002 In 2002 the PKK officially changes its ideological paradigm, shifting to the democratic confederalism. The intro-organizational approach begins to include not only an analysis of personality, but also how this analysis is conducted. The autonomous women's structures already in place by this time are moving away from positivism and toward a focus on morals and ethics. The construction of the concept of revolutionary personality as we know it today begins in this time period — and this has influenced the philosophy of teknil.

How Does Tekmil Happen in Practice?

It is important to understand the cultural codes of teknil and its structure. Knowing these can give you a general idea of what teknil looks like. Most of the points below are common to any teknil, but there are differences.

So, we can name the following points:

- People sit in an equal circle or other form that does not suggest hierarchy.
- Teknil culture also assumes that those participating do not eat, drink (only when necessary), smoke, talk among themselves, entertain themselves, or sit in a laid back, relaxed form.
- Everyone is expected to sit or stand at an equal level, in a “respectful” manner. Imagine how you would sit or stand if you wanted to show respect to your comrades with your very position, with your body.
- The space between people in the teknil is usually clean, with no mess, whether it’s a table or a carpet, it doesn’t matter. It is open to thought and participation.
- Clean clothing and a generally neat appearance are welcomed in the teknil, and hats are removed. The essence of this cultural element is the view that a person’s inner state as well as their ideas, intentions, and attitudes toward others are reflected in his or her outer appearance, and vice versa.

What is the Sequence of Interactions in Teknil?

- The teknil is started by the moderator. He/she allows the participants who wish to do so to speak in order and writes down briefly the essence of what is said in the teknil.
- All participants should have a notebook or something to take notes. teknil involves a thought process and preparation, so items for teknil are not written down 10 minutes before teknil, but continuously when reflection or thought occurs. An important way to prepare for teknil may be to set aside a special time for it, a day or more before teknil.
- Those participating can raise their hand to speak out. With the permission of the facilitator, one may begin to state one’s points. You may speak only once with items of self-criticism and criticism, and once with suggestions.
- After self-criticism and criticism have been expressed by everyone who wanted to speak, you can collect the suggestions into a list, and then discuss them one by one.
- After the end of the discussion, the moderator summarizes the teknil. The goal is to go through the topics of criticism and self-criticism, and to give them a common form, to present them in a big picture. Facilitator can give a perspective on what they see and try to refresh the idea of what needs to be thought about, reflected and worked on.
- It is also possible to run through the decisions made about the proposals, to recall the tasks undertaken and the collective decisions.

So, the structure of teknil in brief:

- Self-criticism.
- Critique
- Suggestions
- Evaluation

Tips for Teknil

These tips are the accumulated experiences of teknil, and point out its characteristics as well as the importance of its basic ideas.

- If there is an autonomous non-male structure or group, it should have its own separate teknil. Making sure that such a structure has time allocated to its autonomous teknil (rather than organizing it as extra work) is the task of the whole group or organization, not just its autonomous part. Autonomous teknil without men is not an additional, optional activity, but just as important teknil. Why is it important? Because in a mixed gender space we can observe a different dynamic that is often dominated by patriarchal behavior. An autonomous teknil without men can open doors that would not otherwise be available to non-male teknil participants, and allow them to create their own solidarity and spirit in the struggle to change the patriarchal mentality. This, in turn, can bring more progressive approaches, thinking and solutions to the entire collective. It can also create a space for analysis, discussion, or critique of something that, for whatever reason, is better discussed in a space without men – or it can serve any other purpose or meaning that the autonomous structure determines for itself. The main purpose of autonomous teknil is for non-cismale comrades to be able to make deeper critique and analysis of each other in a setting where those critiques cannot be used to divide these comrades by male comrades. It allows space for critiques directed to male friends to be brought from the autonomous structure rather than one non-cismale individual. This prevents the exploitation of conflict by male comrades as a single individual cannot be singled out as bringing the critique. It therefore empowers non-cismale comrades and has more force behind it when the critique is delivered.
- Teknil can have a shorter form, intended for situations in which coherence, shortness, and clarity are needed. In the context of Rojava, it can be called a “military teknil” – for example, such a teknil is used at the front, after or before combat operations. The military teknil looks the same, but is held in a standing position, in a circle, and is characterized by rapidity, shortness – connected to the nature of environment (the front line). However, the short form of criticism should not be confused with a lack of comradeship, or love for comrades, which are the foundations of any criticism regardless of the situation. In the context of other countries and less dangerous situations, short teknil can be applied in situations of different actions and activities that require coherent teamwork and involve some degree of risk and the need for a brief process of criticism and reflection on the spot.

- Try to overcome your ego. Criticism is a gift.
- Empathy, love and respect. Give and receive, think about the feelings of others.
- A respectful, serious environment is an integral part of teknil. Such an atmosphere is characterized partly by an absence of joking, smoking, eating and drinking.
- Speak unambiguously, compactly and clearly. More often than not, there is no absolute need for detail in criticism. Excessive explanation of things and situations, and going deeper into criticism are not the same thing.
- Beware of strong language or statements such as “it’s obvious,” “everyone knows/feels/thinks/does it,” “crazy,” “disgusting,” etc. Think about how the way we express ourselves helps to build connection and understanding, or create separation between comrades. Criticism and self-criticism should help progress and develop, not verbally beat people down.
- When giving criticism, it is good to not only point out where we see shortcomings in our comrades’ approach, but also to offer perspective and ways they can work to overcome these shortcomings. This helps us also to consider the person we are criticizing subjectively, from their view, and to focus on how we can all work to improve our militancy.
- Criticism should be given in the 3rd person in relation to others. It helps to see criticism and its topic as a subject of analysis lying openly in front of everyone in the teknil. Criticism in the 3rd person helps the criticized person to think about themselves in a depersonalized way, to accept criticism more easily, and to view it more objectively. On the contrary, the 2nd person is associated with a more personal approach, giving the impression of addressing not the collective but the individual.
- Teknil as a process is not guided by emotion. The philosophy of teknil suggests that emotion cannot be the basis of criticism. Nevertheless, emotion is very important and cannot be excluded from what we do. Emotions are part of us, of collective dynamics and relationships. But the way we handle emotions, the way we express them, the impact we have on each other in the emotional field, the meaning we attach to them, and the impact they have on what we do is something to reflect upon. While emotions are always with us and in us, what we put into teknil should still be based only on ideas, values, principles, analysis, and reflection. On the other hand, giving meaning to and caring for emotion is a necessary and ongoing work of the whole collective, each and every one of us. First, we need to work on how we (don’t) share emotions, how we (don’t) take responsibility for our own and others’ emotions, how we (don’t) support each other, and on the gender, class or race patterns of these dynamics. Second, we can create and cultivate dedicated space and times for the collective care of emotions, as an extension of the previous suggestion.
- In your criticism, name people and things specifically.
- Teknil requires preparation and careful thought beforehand. Such preparation can mean writing down your thoughts. Lack of preparation leads to loss of concentration in teknil, repetition, and forgetting criticism.

- Don't respond to criticism. Not only verbally, but it's also important to watch your body expression and gestures. There are times when people giving or receiving criticism are in a vulnerable position. Things like eye rolling, sighing, impatient gestures, giggling, etc. can negatively affect the giving or receiving of criticism as well as the emotions of those involved.
- Do not repeat criticism that has already been given.
- Don't be afraid of silence.
- Relying on the fact that teknil is a reserved formal place for criticism can become difficult to give and take criticism... outside of teknil. Teknil prioritizes qualities such as humbleness and the ability to listen, give and receive — these qualities should not remain only within teknil. Therefore, criticism expressed outside the formal framework of teknil should be accepted in the same way, in the spirit of comradeship — by listening carefully. In the same time, criticisms should also be made outside of teknil when possible. Don't reserve everything that you have to say for this one moment. Teknil is also a room that is being opened to make it possible to voice critiques that feel difficult to make in every-day-life, but don't make it a habit to only use teknil when you want to feedback something to someone and otherwise stay closed up. For example it can become an unhealthy dynamic if comrades store up criticisms they have until the day when there is teknil and are not working to develop that skill in every day life. Nevertheless do think on proper expression, serious and valuing manner, and if that does not feel possible without the structure of teknil, do it rather within that moment.
- In the criticism that is given to you, look for even 1% self-reflection and reflection as opposed to 99% counter-arguments. Even if the criticism was based on untrue assumptions, or what you believe to be a distorted view of events, it is based on the view of reality and events of your comrades. Before start to clarify the situation, you should at least think about what led to this criticism, and respect the fact that a comrade is trying to give you the gift of criticism with the best of intentions — and believe in those intentions, not in the idea that they want to attack you with words. Think about where all the counterarguments you can find come from — maybe the hurt ego? Giving criticism to someone can be very difficult. Think about how much you make yourself available or accessible to criticism. Appreciate the contribution and efforts of the comrade. If what is said still needs clarification, wait until the next day or later and discuss it with the person who criticized you — not to “restore the truth” — but first to better understand why the comrade or comrade perceived something in this way, and to better understand the essence of the criticism itself.
- Allowing time for reflection is a good thing. Think about how and when you present your criticism. It doesn't have to be about the liberal approach of delaying and postponing the critique process because it's hard to give. When it comes to the right timing for critiques, you have to assess how the criticism relates to the overall situation around you and the group, what the mood is. It's not a question of giving the criticism in the easiest form — rather, you need to find out if there's still work to be done before and after the criticism has been given. This approach seeks to make criticism not the easiest, but as effective and useful as possible.

- Don't apologize for your shortcomings. Work on them. However, don't miss the point when an apology is still needed — while not abandoning working on your shortcomings because an apology was made.
- Every criticism has its share of self-criticism, and vice versa. Collective living and working together imply that we are responsible for each other and that we create our reality together. We do not exist completely separate and isolated from one another. Therefore, the origin of every mistake, every shortcoming, can be seen and analyzed in relation to all other comrades. For example, when listening to criticism addressed to someone in the collective, think — why didn't you support this comrade to find a solution to this or that problem, to find a different point of view, to change their behavior, to develop in some way? In this way, anyone and everyone can find something to reflect upon for themselves in any criticism or self-criticism expressed in the teknil.
- In addition to the latter point, criticisms that you hear in a teknil given to somebody else you can also apply to yourself and realise something in yourself. So it can be helpful to listen to each criticism attentively and with reflective mind even if its not directed to you. Often something that was shown on the example at another comrade is something that everyone can work on in themselves. This is because the dynamics in that we act are often informed by the oppressive system in that we all learned to act.
- Structural variations are possible with an "Update" section. It's up to the choice of the collective practicing teknil.

To summarize, the following tasks of teknil can be defined:

- The process of building camaraderie and fostering stronger relationships through self-criticism and criticism.
- Coordination.
- Development of one's own personality and finding that growth in the collective.
- Breaking down hierarchy.
- Fighting the oppressive mentality.
- Resolving conflicts and overcoming egos, understanding the influence of the individual on the collective and vice versa.
- Limiting nonconstructive conversations.
- Finding collective growth.
- Conducting analysis on a shared basis.
- Sharing perspectives on situations.
- Creating people capable of living in a better society. Our current approaches are associated with systems of oppression such as capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

Foundation of Tekmil

It is important to mention and highlight what values support the method of teknil, if its practice is to be meaningful. The practice of teknil can be superficial and punctilious – people give critiques and self-critiques just for the sake of getting through it, or using the occasion to attack and put others down. The reason why we criticize is out of care for each other and ourselves, to take responsibility to help each other.

These values are:

- Common understanding and acceptance of the method
- Comradeship and mutual respect
- Humbleness and love for learning and self-improvement

A special task of teknil is the development of a militant personality. This concept entails:

- Collective values.
- Comradeship and love as the basis of relationships.
- Collective life instead of individualism. Balance between the collective and the individual.
- Commitment. Self-discipline and responsibility, overcoming challenges and doing the best you can to oneself and to the collective.
- Searching for solutions instead of problems. Have a mindset that it is possible to win. If we cannot perceive a victory, we can't win.
- Humbleness, listening and patience are militant qualities.
- To be able to use the tools of teknil we need collective standards and agreements. If we don't understand the foundation we don't understand the criticism. Without this base we give critique from a subjective position.

Let us end with a statement, encapsulating the principles and culture of teknil:

“We analyze not the moment but history; not the individual but society.”

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