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Making sense: research as active engagement | Joost Jongerden[▲]

Abstract

When research gives voice to groups or people who are considered “deviant” this can lead to the charge that research is biased. In this paper, I will discuss the issue of bias in relation to my own work on the PKK. I will argue that the accusation of bias is related to a hierarchy of voices, in which some voices are considered more credible than others. I will furthermore argue that when we want to understand how particular actors make sense of themselves, their being in the world, and their interaction with others, then clearly, there is no other option but to observe their perspective.

Keywords: Methodology; the PKK; making sense; research

Introduction

As a spin-off to my research on modernity and ordering in the southeast of Turkey (Jongerden, 2007), I have studied the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkêren Kurdistan*, PKK) (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2011; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2011; Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012; Casier and Jongerden, 2012; Casier and Jongerden, 2012; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013; Jongerden, 2015).¹ In this work, I have sought to understand the PKK’s outlook and actions, how these make sense for those involved, and I have treated the militants as political actors endowed with interests and the will to elaborate and articulate those interests² (Gould, 1995: 195). In my work on the PKK, I started from this very simple idea that what the PKK, its activists and militants, its leaders and rank and file do and think actually make sense, and if things look incomprehensible to us it simply is ‘because we are too far away from the situation to know the actual contingencies under which the action was chosen’ (Becker, 1998: 42). Over the

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¹ I use the acronym “PKK” here as an umbrella term, referring to all those who are enacting the organisation, the movement, and the idea of the PKK.

² Elsewhere and some years ago, Marlies Casier and I argued that “Most of the academic literature on the PKK does not attempt to understand the movement, but tries to show the PKK as an expression of something else. Unsurprisingly, a significant part of the academic literature on the PKK is written from the perspective of criminology (...) and of terrorism and counter-insurgency (...) or a convergence of the two” (Casier and Jongerden, 2012).



years, however, I have received various comments, from colleagues and peers suggesting that my focus on how the PKK explain themselves in their own words appears to come very close to legitimising and justifying the official party line. As if when a scholar tries to explain the PKK in its own words, engaging and understanding the party's own perspective, the result is not academic but political. The suggestion is that the way I give credibility to their voices undermines "the descriptive adequacy or truth status of our accounts" (Sayer, 2011: 45). It is this issue of bias and the idea that one should take an objectivist position that I wish to discuss in this article. I will discuss this in the context of what I think sociology should do: make sense of practices and things.

Credibility: why them?

To some, a non-biased position involves a vision from nowhere; objectivity as the vision from the outside, from all around, equally. To others, a non-biased position implies a position from everywhere, which is being nowhere in particular. The trick of seeing everything from nowhere or everywhere is referred to as the "God position" or the "God trick" (Harraway, 1988: 584); it is that position which enables scientists to make claims without being influenced by subjective factors, either because of an outer position of pure or direct objectivity or a position in which objectivity is attained as the many subjective factors combine and balance one another in a kind of cancelling out. However, I feel it is more likely that the disembodied gaze from nowhere, or everywhere, the so-called God, is not possible and not desirable (Becker, 1967; 1998; 2013; Harraway, 1988). Instead, I adhere to an approach of reasoning from cases and identifying variables (Becker, 1998; 2013), of engaging with partial knowledge, which is a perspective of partial sight and limited voices, and always someone's sight and someone's voice. Thus, knowledge is "always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" (Harraway, 1988: 586). Research always involves partiality, since we are always working from and with particular social constructions of the world and have to consider the specific circumstances under which something is deemed "true". And if one tries, as I do, to investigate the what, where, when, how, and why of certain actors, if one wants to understand how these actors make sense of themselves, their being in the world, then clearly, one is required to examine their perspective.

Taking a perspective is not bias. In *Whose Side Are We On*, the sociologist Howard Becker (1967) argues that we always take perspectives, but only particular perspectives run the risk of being qualified as biased. He argues that "the accusation (of bias) arises in one important class of cases". This is "when the research gives credence, in any serious way, to the perspective of the subordinate group in some hierarchical relationship" (Becker, 1967: 240). The accusation of bias is thus related to the recognition of particular voices; of subordinate voices, of "others", as credible. Becker distinguishes between two forms in which the accusation occurs. The first is the suspicion of bias when a

story is told from the perspective of the subordinate, or, if one likes, “the other”; the second is the suspicion of bias when the research takes place in an open conflict, where established hierarchies are called into question (ibid: 241, 244).

Beginning with the first, the telling of a story from the perspective of the subordinate (other) is questioned on the basis of a hierarchy of credibility. In our case, the right to tell the story of the PKK is questioned from the perspective of the superordinate (say, Turkey) or, more generally, from the perspective from those who have defined the PKK as the unintelligible outside (such as the state, particular Kurdish organisations or Turkish (leftist) parties, for various reasons). The moment we accept the credibility of the PKK as an actor with a story to tell, we become prone to accusations of bias. This becomes aggravated when “We compound our sin and further provoke charges of bias by not giving immediate attention and ‘equal time’ to the apologies and explanations of official authority” (Becker, 1967: 242). In other words, if we tell the story from the perspective of the subordinate, or the other, we become duty-bound to tell it also from the perspective of the dominant—and, by implication, all other perspectives, returning us to the objectivist position of telling a story from everywhere, the impossible God trick. In the second form of the accusation of bias—in the context of an open conflict in which established hierarchies are called into question—the accusation is prompted by the apparently conflicting definitions of reality. This becomes problematic insofar as it calls into question the very legitimacy of a political system: “When the situation is political, the researcher may accuse himself or be accused of bias by someone else, when he gives credence to the perspective of either party to the political conflict” (Becker, 1967: 241).

The point is, however, that the issue is not one of whether to take a perspective or not, but rather that when scholars engage with perspectives related to groups of people in subordinate positions, or, for one reason or another, designated as “other”, and in the context of an open conflict about the definition of reality, that scholars and their work run the risk of being adjudged as unworthy (Becker, 1967: 247). The accusation of bias, therefore, can be looked upon as disciplinary action, as an action that tends (and sometimes intends) to result in scholars organising their research around certain norms of credibility.

Obviously, scholars taking a perspective should be concerned with the limits of what they study, the boundaries beyond which findings cannot be applied. And this is not the disclaimer in which we clarify that our study is only about the PKK so cannot be extended to other militant groups in other regions, since such “findings may very well hold if the conditions are the same elsewhere” (Becker, 1967: 247). Rather, it is that we have specifically made our study through the eyes of one particular movement or party; our study only speaks and only *can* speak from that one vantage point. Such an approach can clarify how certain things matter, how their relation to the world matters—or, even

better, it can look at how a political actor, the PKK, views its being in the world. As such, then, my research is not so much concerned with reporting “their views as social facts about them but takes them seriously as evaluations of their experience” (Sayer, 2011: 9).

Making sense

To make sense of the PKK is to locate the organisation in time and place; making sense of the PKK is about a grounding of the PKK, is about the question of how they understand themselves. It is a making sense of the PKK by listening to what those active within the organisation have to say about themselves, by engaging with how they see the world and how they explain themselves and their actions. It does not seek to judge that.

Following the work of the sociologist Howard Becker, I start from the assumption that the PKK and their activities make perfect sense for those who are involved, and that we need to figure out the social context in which things seem to make sense. Thus, when we assert that the PKK, the ideology, the actions of its members, seem bizarre or unintelligible, this only states that it seems so from a particular (outsider’s) perspective (Becker, 1998: 28). In my research, therefore, I look for the sense that actions make, that concepts or ideas make, at least for those involved (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012: 6). Making sense of the PKK means trying to understand how the PKK makes sense of itself and the circumstances under which things are understood.

Examining how the PKK makes sense of itself may seem to be an obvious thing to do, but it is not. To date, only a few studies have treated the PKK and its militants as credible voices. In *Blood and Belief*, a key work on the history of the party, the author, Aliza Marcus, decided to only interview former PKK members and dissidents. Displaying the courage to make things explicit, Marcus (2007: vii) explained herself thus:

There are some who will complain that this book places too much stock in information provided by former PKK members. They will argue this information is suspect, because people who have taken part in an illegal, violent movement cannot be trusted. (...) I believe that in order to really understand the PKK, or any such movement, for that matter, it is necessary to talk to those people who actually were part of it.

Only former members were interviewed, Marcus goes on to explain: “For a variety of reasons, but mainly because current PKK members rarely speak freely” (ibid.). There is, of course, always an issue around the sense and extent to which a person is speaking “freely” (people are constantly in conversation with themselves about what to tell and what not) and the impact of this on the version they give to the world (their version, at that time, and, moreover, with that investigator). Disregarding this and associated issues, however, there is here a clear implication in this reconstruction of the party’s history that the current party members are somehow not considered credible “voices”, that they are,

presumably, taken to be bound by the party line whereas former party members are not.³

In other works, however, the narratives of those associated with the PKK are routinely qualified, if not dismissed, as ideological. Thus, one could say that my⁴ primary interest is in the stories disregarded by others. And when I have engaged with the question of how the PKK makes sense of itself (how they make sense of things themselves), this has meant for me that I should, as Gould (1995: 195) puts it, treat militants as political actors endowed with interests and the will to elaborate and articulate those interests. This also assumes what we might refer to as the reflexive monitoring of *actions*, implying the possibility of a practical as well as discursive consciousness, of a tacit knowledge that is skilfully applied in the enactment of courses of action in addition to the capacity of agents to “give reasons” and “rationalise” their conduct (Giddens, 1979).

Take, for example, the article *The Kurdistan Workers’ Party and a New Left in Turkey* (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2012). This article is based in large part on an analysis of the publication *In Remembrance of the Proletarian and Internationalist Revolutionary Haki Karer*, a 33-page text published in May, 1978. This text was published one year after the killing of Haki Karer in Antep, a large city in Turkey on the north-western fringe of the Kurdistan region. The text is credited to the Kurdistan Devrimcileri (Kurdistan Revolutionaries), the name by which a small group of committed radicals was known before adopting the name “PKK”, and to which Haki Karer belonged until he was killed by a member of a rival group, named Stêrka-Sor. In this text, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries formulate a scathing criticism of the left in Turkey. Through the text and conversations with militants about issues discussed in the text, we can learn about the contentious relationship between the PKK and the left and understand how the nature of political struggle was perceived by its activists.

Another example is our study of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013; Jongerden and Akkaya 2013), two concepts that play a central role in the PKK’s idea of social reconstruction and through which we may question dominant political imaginaries. The concepts of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy sound incomprehensible from the perspective of established political vocabularies. In such vocabularies, autonomy is defined as a form of sub-sovereignty granted to institutions within a sovereign state, the transfer of (limited) state functions and responsibilities to institutions that form a sub-state (Reyes and Kaufman, 2011). In the PKK discourse, however, it refers to a new grounding of the political status of people, on the basis of self-government; in terms of competences

³ I am not arguing against interviewing dissidents, on the opposite, but argue against dismissing those who are active within the movement as credible voices.

⁴ There are others too, of course, who provide their own analysis of the PKK; see, for example Akkaya (2015); Casier (2010a); Casier (2010b); Gurbuz (2016); Gunes (2012); Gunes and Zeydanlioglu (2013); Smets and Akkaya (2015); and Yarkin (2015), to name just a few.

(Illich, 1977), social practices (Negri, 1991; Hardt and Negri, 2004), new political practices based on active citizenship and public action (Arendt, 1990 [1963]), or of cohabitation (Butler, 2015). When Akkaya and I discussed and presented the PKK's concept of democratic confederalism at academic conferences of MESA (Middle East Studies Association) in 2009 and WOCMES (World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies) in 2010 and subsequently started to write articles on the issue, several colleagues musing on the subject referred to the concepts of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy as incomprehensible PKK-talk. This brings me back again to the issue of making sense raised by Becker: when something seems incomprehensible to us, it means we are too far away from that very something to know the actual contingencies under which an action or position was chosen. In other words, the problem is our lack of understanding, combined with judgement, in which case the challenge is to try to understand the way thoughts and practices are being developed and to learn from them (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 618).

Therefore, we took a closer look at democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy and explored these as a way of doing politics, as formulated by those active within the PKK, in addition to investigating the inspiration for this reformulation of politics. This engagement made it possible to raise questions about three important pillars of contemporary politics (the state, class and party) and of sociological concepts (power, people and politics) and put the PKK's thinking and actions into a historical and contemporary perspective (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012; 2013; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013; Jongerden, 2015).

Am I that label?

Although the PKK is routinely characterised as a guerrilla/armed organisation, an insurgent movement or a terrorist organisation, many in the PKK would strongly object to a definition of the movement in military (or similar) terms. If we agree that the rationality is in the eye of the beholder, then a starting point is to be found in how the activists see themselves. The self-definition is that of a political movement, and when one talks with people in the movement, it is also defined as a youth movement and as a women's movement. When the PKK was established as a political party in 1978, it had a classical communist party type organisational structure, with a General Secretary as the leading party official and an Executive Committee responsible for direct operations. The highest executive institution was the Central Committee, and the Party Congress was the party's highest decision-making body. Over the years, however, the PKK transformed and grew more diverse, into a party-complex, a formation of parties and organisations in all four parts of Kurdistan, *Bakur* (Northern Kurdistan) in Southeast Turkey, *Basur* (Southern Kurdistan) in Northern Iraq, *Rojava* (Southwest Kurdistan) in Northern Syria, and *Rojbilat* (East Kurdistan) in Northwest Iran. The most important of these

organisations today is the Association of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK).⁵ The KCK enacts itself as a network of village, city, and regional councils, whose assembly is called the Kurdistan People's Congress (Kongra-Gel). In short, what we used to know as the political party called the PKK institutionalised itself in various areas as an expression of a radical democratic discourse on active citizenship (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013).

We could take this question of what the PKK is a step further. When we consider the PKK from the perspective of the KCK, the questions arise as to what extent we can separate or assume a pre-existing separation between organisation and population. Essentially, the KCK is engaging with an idea of social reconstruction that tries to develop the concept of democracy beyond nation and state, developing a bottom-up system for self-government referred to as democratic confederalism. The cornerstone of this democratic confederalism is the development of an alternative form of politics through self-organisation, a politics as self-government. In making this move, the PKK distinguishes state-craft from government, and like the Paris Commune (1871), almost 150 years ago, thinks not in terms of a centralist state but of “a free union of autonomous collectives” and a “confederation of free peoples” (Ross, 2015: 38). This association of people in a confederal union of communes lies at the basis of government in the three “cantons” of Rojava and is practiced as an assembly democracy, from street to city and regional level. It is not clear that there is any particular point or line where the KCK as a party-institution ends and the population starts. This makes the question of where the party ends and the constituency starts problematic, which is not a problem of finding a dividing line, however, so much as a problem of theory, because it makes an ontological claim about the nature of politics as presupposing a duality, comprised by an actor (the party) and a population (the people). So ex-ante distinction between party and constituency is based on a particular form of politics, namely on the idea that politics is an act in which people are represented, whether this be in the form of what Weber calls “an appropriated representation”, a “free representation” and an “instructed representation” (Weber, cited in Hardt and Negri, 2004: 245-47). Yet this is not politics per se, but a version of politics, the version that has become dominant, and one different from politics envisaged in the KCK. This idea of politics is what Kropotkin (and after him Bookchin and now the PKK) refers to as the Roman or centralist imaginary of politics, as that which informed the American and French constitutionalists of the 18th century. This is contrasted with a Hellenic participatory and communal form of

⁵ Originally the Association of Associations in Kurdistan (*Koma Komalên Kurdistan*, KKK), the KCK is both a concept embodying the idea of democratic confederalism as developed by Abdullah Öcalan and a societal organisation presented as an alternative to the nation-state that Öcalan sees as a model for the resolution of the problems of the Middle East; in the PKK party complex, the KCK, can be considered the executive body, with all parties and organisations coordinated through it.

politics, which is not based on a herd of subjects and a politics of representation, and is rather based on an active citizenship, where action is not the prerogative of professional politicians but people, citizens themselves (Jongerden and Akkaya 2013; Jongerden 2015).

When we allow for the possibility of the idea of this other form of politics, this non-duality of active political actor and population, we consider instead the possibility of a politics based on citizen access to the public realm (with participation in decision-making as its constitutive basis), characteristically marked by fluidity and a hybridity of roles. In this politics, it is difficult to determine where the active actor ends and passive or supportive actor begins, since people are mostly both. Structurally they fill both roles, and practically they move from one to the other or play both at the same time. This fluidity and hybridity is expressed by the Invisible Committee (Committee, 2014: 22):

We don't fight in the midst of the people "like fish in water"; we're the water itself, in which our enemies flounder – soluble fish.

One may draw an analogy with the nature of light, in which we choose either wave or particle, that which we look for determines what we see. But the party-people or actor-constituency binary (duality) is not just a misleading distinction, it is one that is performative too. The party-constituency speech-act bring into being what it names, making the division between the party and the people by talking about it. Insofar as it is a performative, the production of the actor-constituency duality and its conceptual and productive imposition, then a question is raised about the relation between theory and counter-insurgency. To what extent, we may ask, is our language, our research on militancy itself, a part of the "exclusionary" practices that create the "insurgent", so that what remains is on the one hand a governable population and on the other a paramilitary, which can be annihilated by virtue of its separation? To what extent is the actor-constituency duality a linguistic counter-insurgency, creating the category of the insurgent (literally, one who rises up within, one who insurges), to be combatted and neutralised (put down), and that of the population, to be pacified and governed?⁶ I think these are questions we should not avoid.

Final remarks

I began my paper with critical remarks I received on my work on the PKK, qualifying this work as biased, and developed this into a discussion on methodology. To conclude, and also in reference to the title, I would like to state, firstly, that research always takes perspectives and ought to show its perspectives and, second, that sociology is about making sense. Making sense of the PKK can only be done by listening and treating militants as political actors endowed with interests and the will to elaborate and articulate those interests. Does this mean that we, as social scientists, are merely a serving hatch, that there is no critical engagement? No, we are not serving hatches, and yes

⁶ A population ceases to exist when it ceases to be governable (Committee, 2014: 22).

there is critical engagement, but here I would make a distinction between criticism and critique. Criticism looks for fault, for what is lacking or incomplete or incorrect, for flaws and imperfections, for what seems not to make sense. Criticism can be partial and selective; critique, however, cannot. Critique refers to a thorough evaluation, yet not from everywhere or nowhere, but from within. As a result, or better, as a method:

[C]ritique maintains an intimate relationship with the object it works over: it inhabits the object's terms, takes them as far as they can go, and in so doing recovers the potentials immanent to a field of thought even as it highlights the boundedness of that field. Critique becomes so intimate to its object that the critic risks being identified with it. Just think of Marx: he so affirmatively embraces political economy in his *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* that it is often assumed that *Kapital* is a political economy, that Marx is a political economist (Taylor 2013).

This implies an active engagement with the subject of study, the development of an understanding from within. It thus informs a type of research based not only on interviews, but also on a reading of primary texts and just being (spending time) with people to understand their narratives. I do not make the suggestion that the making sense approach makes the subaltern speak, it is I, the scholar, who speaks, but this is done in the form of a dialogue with those whose narratives I engage with. That is why spending time and a process of dialogue is necessary, to discuss results with those on whose narratives we base ourselves. I am also not suggesting, referring to Borland, that our research should be validated by our research collaborators; rather, I aim to extend the conversation in order to gain understanding:

For when we do interpretations, we bring our own knowledge, experience, and concerns to our material, and the result, we hope, is a richer, more textured understanding of its meaning. I am suggesting that we might open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms once we are safely ensconced in our university libraries ready to do interpretation. By extending the conversation we initiate while collecting oral narratives to the later stage of interpretation, we might more sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research (Borland, 1991).

Research is an active engagement.

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