

Book Reviews

Thomas Schmidinger, **Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds**, London: Pluto Press, 2018, 298 pp., (ISBN: 9780745337722).

Foreign and native academics, journalists, and activists alike (in some cases a combination of all three) are scrambling from home and abroad to fill not just a gap, but a chasm, in the literature on *Rojava* (Western/Syrian Kurdistan). Thomas Schmidinger's *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds* from as current as this year, is a welcome addition to the growing field within Kurdish studies of examining this existing revolutionary praxis. This being the fourth German, second Turkish, and first English edition (updated between 2017-2018) of Schmidinger's, the book is a reflection of how the current situation in *Rojava* is changing moment to moment with significant socio-economic implications for not only the people of the new Democratic Federation of Northern Syria but the entire region itself. Within this existing gap of academic literature, Schmidinger's take on *Rojava*, through his more than decade-long research and fieldwork, is essential to understanding the region's internal and external dynamics. This account just begins to cover the impressive empirical research and literature review of the book – though it only seems to be restricted to the *Rojava* revolution since 2011 within the context of the “Syrian Kurds” and their history dating from the late Ottoman Empire until the Syrian Civil War. This latter point will be further developed later on in this review.

This book is by far one of—if not—the most current authentic and nuanced work out there on *Rojava* today. It ranges from intricate and empirical detail for chapters on the vast ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities of the people of *Rojava*, including Alevis, Christians, Êzîdîs, Jews, and Muslims from the ethnic Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, and Kurds, and their shared and conflicting histories in the region. The author even goes as far as to include the Kurds in Damascus/Aleppo and the historical and geographical role they've played in the region along with the recent annexation of Efrîn (Afrin) by Turkey and their jihadist counterparts earlier this year (chapter 16). To date, I have yet to see anyone even acknowledge in their academic work the former, and certainly not the latter. Particularly heartening is the attention Schmidinger brings from the onset of the book to the ongoing debate and political implications within the discourse of the movement as well as its practice. In the initial chapters, he highlights how just merely distinguishing between *Rojava*, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, and Syrian Kurdistan is taking a political stance, though, ultimately he acknowledges that his insistence on using



the latter is purely geographical and nothing else. Despite his not openly acknowledging the colonial context, he does make a point of using the politically correct names in mostly Kurmanji (the main dialect of Kurdish) when he is talking about *Bakur* (North/Turkish Kurdistan) and the proper spelling of *Efrîn* (Afrin). Though these may seem insignificant, the political implications that he is able to recognize in doing this throughout the book, speaks to the extent of his nuanced and critical analysis of the region despite being an outsider. He actually leads the reader through a historical and current account of the exhaustive lists of political Kurdish parties in Syria (including an impressive diagram in the beginning). His empirical analysis and insight into the internal coalitions within the existing Kurdish political parties of the past and present aside from the PYD, Democratic Union Party (YPG, *People's Protection Unit*/YPJ, *Women's Protection Unit*) is an area that studies of *Rojava* do not often consider as more partisan interpretations of the revolution.

Schmidinger brings to the table one of the most nuanced and impressive historical and present-day accounts of *Rojava*, drawing on interviews with leaders from different parties, civil society activists, artists, fighters, and religious leaders. He claims to be criticising Western radicals' tendency towards romanticised and exoticised problematic imaginaries of the revolution of *Rojava*. However, in a concerted effort to remain critical and unbiased towards any particular party he actually ends up paying a disservice to the history of radical feminism in *Bakur* that reaches across international borders and has shaped the revolution in *Rojava* and beyond to this day. The extensive tradition of socialist feminism in the *Rojava* revolution that stems from *Bakur* is for the most part overlooked throughout his book. *Rojava* is discussed in a vacuum, as opposed to a seeing it as a continuum of feminism and socialism from Northern (*Bakur*) to Western (*Rojava*) Kurdistan. Aside from one reference in chapter 17 to "the importance of feminism" in relation to autonomous women's councils and a few interviews directly translated from Kurdish women in the newly added section, "Voices of Rojava," there are few references to radical feminism and its role in *Rojava*, let alone in *Bakur*.

Many scholars refer to the 1980s Diyarbakır prison as the birthplace of Kurdish women's resistance in Turkey. Kurdish women resisted Turkish state violence that was targeting them as well as the men in their families. Many prominent Kurdish women leaders such as Sakine Cansız (one of the founders of the PKK, *Kurdistan Workers' Party*), Gültan Kışanak and Leyla Zana and many others were subjected to torture and imprisonment by the Turkish military junta, which led to countless Kurdish women becoming politicised due to their horrific lived experiences. This revolutionary tradition, practice, and ideology stemming from oppression along race, class, and gender lines is reflected today in the women's armed forces of YPJ of *Rojava* and the YPS (*Women's Civil Protection Units*) of the previous autonomous neighbourhoods of Cizre, Nusaybin, and Sur in Amed (Diyarbakır in Turkey). This illustrates how self-

defence (*asayîş*) is a crucial revolutionary factor of the society that stems from these roots of radical Kurdish feminism.

Not only does Schmidinger omit the revolutionary history of Kurdish feminism in the social movement—whether intentionally or not—but he in fact, for the most part, also overlooks the history of the PKK and its formidable role in shaping the *Rojava* revolution in general. This is crucial to understanding why eventually a praxis of the currently imprisoned revolutionary leader of the movement, Abdullah Öcalan’s “democratic confederalism,” emerged decades later in *Rojava* in 2011 in the midst of the Syrian Civil War. What many people—Schmidinger included—fail to realise is that this recent experiment in radical democracy in *Rojava* is a direct result of a decades-long historical feminist struggle of the Kurdish social movement against the Turkish state and patriarchy ranging from initially Marxist-Leninism to this recent interpretation of Murray Bookchin’s feminist anarchism. However, he very rarely speaks of the PKK aside from referencing them and alluding in chapter 10 to how a more extensive analysis of their “checkered history” would be too ambitious a project for this book. Be that as it may, not taking into account the significant role that Abdullah Öcalan and his revolutionary feminist ideology historically has played, is also detrimental to Schmidinger’s extensive account of what he understands as the *Rojava* revolution. In his chapter entitled the “Kurdish Para-state,” he pays homage to *Rojava*’s “social contract” and even outlines one of its most distinguishing factors, which is the emphasis on how *Rojava* as a political project is not only for Kurds but for all the many religious and ethnic minorities in the region. Yet he does not acknowledge the leftist feminist historical tradition behind that existing social contract and only considers its religious and ethnic pluralism. There is no mention of some of the most prominent radical feminist aspects of the contract in opposition to the patriarchal structures of the region and the larger capitalist system (chapter 17).

There is no mention of the present-day historical Kurdish feminist and socialist continuities across Turkish and Syrian borders regarding the united political phenomenon of the co-chair principle, gendered armed civil protection units and autonomous grassroots neighbourhoods and municipalities attempting to create varied practices of Öcalan’s democratic confederalism. Recently—from 2015 to 2016—these latter autonomous neighbourhoods in *Bakur* were so systematically crushed by the Turkish state that very little remains of them. To this day those Kurdish cities and Kurds in general, are still feeling every aspect of the effects of Turkey’s continued socio-economic oppression on their language, culture, and very existence. Moreover, in spite of the existence of international borders between *Bakur* and *Rojava*, the Turkey has boldly renewed its colonial practices from Nusaybin in 2016 to the most recent annexation of Efrîn. Lastly, there is the horrific shared practice of sexualised state violence against female guerrilla fighters, previously Ekin Van (Kevser Eltürk) in Muş and more recently Baran Kobanê (Amina Omar) in *Rojava*, who fell victim to the Turkish state brutality of necropolitics. By omitting such

blatant patterns of oppression and solidarity across Kurdish feminism and socialism within these regions of Kurdistan, Schmidinger despite his more than impressive empirical and social fieldwork and research, fails to comprehend the complete picture of what the *Rojava* revolution really encompasses.

It is true that recent literature on *Rojava* and the Kurdish social movement has a tendency to generalise, romanticise, and exoticise Kurdish women; nonetheless, essentially completely excluding the histories of Kurdish feminism and socialism against a backdrop of colonial patriarchal relations does a disservice to the author's overall critical analysis, aside from his intention of avoiding the imaginary and fantasy of the movement. Perhaps precisely because he is a [white/non-Kurdish] European man he chooses not to engage with Kurdish feminism as he doesn't see himself represented and reflected in that social movement—a respectable stance should that be the case. However, at the same time by ignoring the tradition he ends up silencing Kurdish women's voices, removing their agency and reinforcing their oppressed colonial histories. It is not entirely clear whether or not what I (and I imagine many others in the field) would consider a significant omission is intentional on the part of Schmidinger or he was steered in that direction unknowingly or unwillingly. Perhaps the PYD in their understandable concerted effort to avoid any official political affiliation with the PKK in the interest of maintaining their Western allies and arms support, play a factor. I would like to emphasise that this is all just pure speculation on my part in terms of Schmidinger's motivations behind this.

Overall though this is an extraordinary empirical historic and journalistic account of the Kurds in Syria but it doesn't really go far beyond that in terms of analysis of some of the dominant traditions of feminism and socialism that exist in the Kurdish movement overall. This project brings into consideration the overall existing debate in the fields of anthropology and sociology regarding maintaining a "critical distance". I believe it is precisely that distance as a white European man from the language, culture, and understanding of the Kurdish social movement that has perhaps caused Schmidinger to overlook such essential aspects as Kurdish radical feminism across colonial state boundaries of the movement. Any understanding of *Rojava* must take into account the interrelated oppression faced by Kurdish women through their direct lived experiences in each of their respective colonial states, that predisposes them to a political consciousness evident in many women of the region. Within the Kurdish feminist social movement there is a saying – one of the "political slogans" that Schmidinger refers to – "*Kurdê azad sinora nasnake*" (Free Kurds don't recognise borders). We should at least try and avoid having borders reinforced for us in our sparse literature.

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Nazand Begikhani, Aisha K. Gill and Gill Hague, **Honour-Based Violence: Experiences and Counter-Strategies in Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish Diaspora**, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015, 189 pp., (ISBN: 9781409421900).

Begikhani, Gill and Hague – each internationally-recognised scholars in violence against women – have in this volume produced an authoritative analysis of the causes, manifestations and consequences of honour-based violence (HBV) in Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish Diaspora. Drawing on new empirical research comprising 166 semi-structured in-depth interviews with key professionals (government officials, health professionals, judiciary, police, women’s NGOs, media outlets, and victims/survivors) in the two regions, plus case studies of so-called “honour killings” and media content analysis, they have written a wide-ranging book addressing theory, policy and practice. The authors have been tenacious in overcoming considerable methodological challenges, including negotiating access to subjects to discuss socially taboo and criminalised practices, and (in Iraqi Kurdistan) doing so in the midst of terrorist attacks by the Islamic State during 2014. With intellectual rigour and an eye to the practice and policy implications, they have amply met their aims to “(i) assess the nature of HBV, including ‘honour’ killings in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and the Kurdish Diaspora in the UK, and (ii) evaluate the impact of HBV on Kurdish women” (p. 13).

The authors address key contemporary debates about whether HBV should be seen as arising from culture, religion or gender inequalities. They rightly identify that “HBV has historically been defined as a category of cultural violence distinct from domestic violence and violence against women (VAW) more generally” (p. 30), but make a clear and compelling argument for situating HBV as one form of VAW. They address the thorny issue of women’s involvement in perpetrating HBV from a feminist perspective, drawing on patriarchal bargaining theory to show that the involvement of female family members in carrying out HBV is still commensurate with patriarchal systems of socialisation that define women’s identity, worth and status in relation to their role within the family. Thus, for many women, “acquiescing to such ideologies becomes the key to both self-worth and status in the community” (p. 31).

As well as advancing theory, the book introduces new empirical data to make a unique comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between women’s experiences of HBV in Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish Diaspora, as well as practical recommendations about policy responses. Three unique points mark this book out from other recent works on HBV: Firstly, the focus on Kurdish communities addresses a significant gap in UK scholarship, research and policy. Despite a number of high-profile Kurdish so-called “honour killings” in the UK over the past 15 years, most policy-making, victim

accounts and empirical research have focused on South Asian communities' experiences of HBV. There remains very little UK scholarship on HBV in Kurdish communities – and so this book is as relevant now, in 2018, as when published in 2015. Secondly, the international comparative analysis of these two regions brings a fresh perspective. It draws out the similarities between Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish Diaspora (challenges faced, policy approaches, nature of violence); but also highlights differences unique to both contexts. Thirdly, the adoption of a feminist perspective strengthens the work by putting victim-survivors' voices and stories at the centre of analysis, whilst contextualising them with the authors' expert knowledge of history, politics, social and cultural attitudes in each of the research locations.

The authors address a broad range of perspectives and topics on HBV. These individual elements are all in themselves interesting, and consistently paint a picture of patriarchal cultural contexts driving HBV – but the breadth of issues addressed means the book loses some overarching narrative cohesion. Reviews of key theoretical debates are interspersed with geo-political, cultural and historical analyses of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, and new empirical research and policy analyses drawing on a range of data sources. Structurally, the chapters jump somewhat between the two countries, and the different analytical focuses.

The authors explain that each chapter has been constructed deliberately as “stand-alone pieces for ease of use by readers wishing to focus on a particular set of issues” (p. 21). They are perhaps right to suggest that it is better suited to be read as a collection of chapters, than as a unified whole. So doing will have the advantage also of widening the appeal of the book to a greater range of readers and interests.

Unexpected and fascinating were the findings about HBV via cyber abuse in Iraqi Kurdistan – women being shamed and dishonoured via the internet. The authors show how the internet has been a double-edged sword for women in Kurdistan: on the one hand, creating new spaces in which to break the silence around HBV and gender violence; on the other hand, feeding the circulation of rumour and gossip and reports of “dishonourable” behaviour. These findings about the use of new media as tools of both liberation and new channels for abuse are particularly pertinent for current debates in the UK and Western Europe about “sexting”, “revenge porn” and other abuses facilitated by social media.

This book will appeal to a wide range of readers, including: academics and scholars from a range of disciplines, including readers in Kurdish studies and culture; academics in sociology, anthropology, criminology, media studies; activists and NGOs in violence against women; national and international policy makers; criminal justice practitioners; and the interested lay reader. This is an interesting, and – despite the tough subject matter – uplifting read. The authors point to concrete actions which can be taken to build on the progress they already identify in both Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish Diaspora. Let

us take inspiration from their conclusion that “change is here to stay. There can be no turning back now” (p. 145).

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Mehmet Orhan, **Political Violence and Kurds in Turkey: Fragmentations, Mobilizations, Participations and Repertoires**, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, 294 pp., (ISBN: 978-1-317-42044-6) & H. Akin Ünver, **Turkey's Kurdish Question: Discourse and Politics since 1990**, Oxon: Routledge, 2015, 196 pp., (ISBN: 978-1-138-85856-5).

The Kurdish Question has been the most debilitating problem in Turkey since its foundation. For many scholars, the roots of this conflict were already present during the Ottoman Empire. Some define it as an ethnic conflict, which oversimplifies the matter and undermines other the complex factors such as class, religion, and political fragmentation. For others, it is a matter of the colonisation of Kurdistan since the Ottoman Empire was torn apart. Official Turkish discourse defines it as a problem of national security and terrorism that has been threatening Turkey's internal and external security for a long time. Each approach to this puzzle undermines the complexities of this long-lasting conflict, yet it remains the most important issue for Turkey's domestic and foreign policy for now and the foreseeable future. Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the state has formulated policies to put an end to this “problem,” more often than not by using a security approach that has limited the number of ways to peacefully resolve the conflict. The Kurdish Question has always found its place at the top of the agenda for any and all governments that have come to power since the beginning of 1980s, in particular. The Kurdish Question has also been extremely visible in Turkey's relations with the international community. It has dominated the debates around Turkey's membership to the European Union and Turkey's tortuous and complex relations with the United States. Scholars have produced many books, articles, op-eds and journalistic pieces on these subjects, which approach these issues from a great number of perspectives. Especially during the last decade or so, a growing interest in Kurdish Studies has paved the way for the foundation of new journals solely focusing on these issues. Routledge's book series on Middle Eastern Politics also has been increasingly publishing on Turkey's Kurdish Question. In this article, I will review two of the recent books that came out of these series of academic research, which in my opinion are excellent contributions to the burgeoning literature.

Mehmet Orhan's *Political Violence and Kurds in Turkey: Fragmentations, Mobilizations, Participations and Repertoires* is one of the most interesting books I have recently read. The material is extremely original and reflects the author's

passion for his subject. The book was based on the author's doctoral dissertation at EHESS de Paris. It focuses on political violence in the predominantly Kurdish area of Turkey with a particular interest in mobilisation patterns and repertoires of political violence and action. The author starts by saying that although the Kurdish nationalist movements he analyses date back to earlier times, the radicalisation of these movements and their appearance as armed struggles really belongs to the twentieth century. Among many others, Orhan is interested in the following questions: "Why did the Kurdish movement result in the use of political violence?", "Which are its agents?", and "How are these actors and their actions formed?" (p. 2). He works to answer these questions by applying a theoretical framework drawn from theories of social movements and political violence. The introduction explains the rationale behind the book in great detail, helping the reader to understand his framing questions. The theoretical approach is carefully formulated, and it is very illuminating to read how he will apply these abstract approaches to the Kurdish case. He also explores the fieldwork experience by adopting a reflexive approach, which clarifies his positionality to the reader without leaving a question mark. He has conducted open-ended interviews with Kurdish militants and their families as well as tribe members who support the Kurdish cause. Orhan also focuses on the Kurdish organisations that are popular today along with those that are no longer in existence (e.g. Rizgari, Kawa, and *Têkoşîn*). He conducted fieldwork in Antep, Batman, Bingöl, Pazarcık, and Siverek between 2005 and 2011 and also included the Kurdish diaspora members in his study and travelled to Berlin, Hamburg, and Paris to conduct interviews with Kurdish activists there. He clearly explains why he has chosen these specific methods and these specific locations for his fieldwork. The fieldwork he has conducted has surely been tough as it is not easy to reach out to these people and ask questions about highly sensitive matters. Studying the Kurdish Question with each and every aspect that is attached to it has been highly arduous and often risky work in Turkey, and the author should be commended for successfully completing such an endeavour. At the same time, while the introductory is strong in the aforementioned ways, it is very long and continues to read like a doctoral thesis. The author places excessive emphasis on trying to explain every single step he has taken, and it sometimes does not flow as smoothly as should a book manuscript. Apart from this, the introduction does help the reader understand the various components involved in bringing this original research to fruition, and it creates interest for the following chapters.

The first chapter focuses on the emergence of the Kurdish political field and internal violence from the 1960s to the 1980s. This is a fantastic literature review, which also includes theoretical insights. After providing historical context starting from the 1940s, the author moves to explaining Eastism and Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths by giving quotes from his interviews, which makes the narrative much more intriguing. Another section focuses on

“radical” movements such as Kawa and Rizgari, among others. The chapter explores the internal divisions, political struggles, and different perspectives of these movements regarding the use of violence. It is a brilliant endeavour that provides extremely original material derived from interviews and archival research. The second chapter examines the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) and the use of political violence as a force for ethnic mobilisation. Again concentrating on the same localities, the author puts the actions of the PKK and theoretical frameworks together in order to unpack the phenomenon of political violence. The author adopts neutral language that does not criminalise any one group or glorify another. He is not shy in critically approaching these sensitive matters, which increases the academic rigour of this work.

The third chapter zooms in on the participation of individuals in violence. A great deal of books and articles have been written on this matter, but they have only brought simplistic explanations and non-intellectual analysis to the fore. Here, the reader is given a set of individual narratives, quotes, and original background conformation derived from archival material with solid theoretical analysis, which enables the reader to challenge the received “wisdom” on this matter. The author documents the reasoning behind joining an armed conflict, polarization between members of Kurdish society and the Turkish state, and how these decisions are made and offers rich context for the fourth chapter, where the author focuses on the repertoires of political violence. The Turkish-Kurdish armed conflict surely does solely consist of clashes between the Turkish Armed Forces and the PKK, but Orhan highlights other means of violence, such as political murders and bomb attacks, which together comprise the political violence committed by the PKK. This time, putting emphasis on the Kurdish *serbîldans* (rebellions), he helps the reader understand the culture of self-sacrifice within the Kurdish movement that paved the way for self-immolations in the name of the Kurdish cause and PKK leader Öcalan. The conclusion then wraps up the whole discussion by clarifying the author’s contributions to the field. Orhan claims that “this [book] is above all a work destined to enrich empirical knowledge about the Kurdish conflict and political violence” (p. 225). I would agree with this remark and would even claim that this is a must-read book for anyone who wants to understand the Kurdish Question today. This book is an antidote to in the numerous studies on the market that simply reinvent the wheel and repeat the already existing arguments without contributing with anything original to the debates. I recommend it to students who are new to Kurdish Studies as well as to more seasoned academics for adding to their syllabi for courses on Turkish, Kurdish, or Middle Eastern politics.

The second book, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question: Discourse and Politics since 1990*, is authored by H. Akin Ünver. The title has surely been selected for marketing purposes but does not do justice to the contents of the book. This volume is based on Ünver’s doctoral dissertation completed at Essex University, but it

has been reformulated such that it reads very well as a book manuscript. The book starts with a condensed introductory chapter. The author begins with an anecdote where he interviews a high-level foreign policy maker in 2012. The interviewee tells him that he should finish his book in a timely fashion because there might not be such a thing as the Kurdish Question soon. The author then continues with three other anecdotes from 2013, 1999, and 1915, where there were different political climates in Turkey and, accordingly, changing view of the Kurdish Question. Ünver uses irony – as he does throughout the book – to make his point: The Kurdish Question needs to be studied through a discursive approach as there are competing and mutually exclusive definitions of this conflict. If we cannot even agree on a definition, how are we to solve this conflict? Ünver reminds us that Turkey is deeply divided over this semantic debate therefore we need to “deconstruct and analyse the constitutive parts of this discursive construct” (p. 3). Throughout the book, Ünver attempts to locate the underlying causes of these different interpretations and constructions of the Kurdish Question. The originality of this book, though, lies not in its analysis on the Turkish official discourse – which is somewhat overdone – but in its comparative approach to the European Union’s and United States’ discourses on this issue in the 1990s. The author gathered data and conducted content analysis on debates within the Turkish Parliament, the European Parliament, and the US Congress. He focuses solely on a period between 1990 and 1999, which begins with the Gulf War and ends with the arrest of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Looking at these accounts, Ünver attempts to come up with a map of the mind-set of politicians and decision-makers in those bodies. He argues that the Kurdish Question in Turkey was depicted variously as a human rights problem, a democratisation problem, a matter of excessive force, an ethnic-identity conflict, a conflict intensified by Turkish military or the PKK, a conflict created by dark foreign powers, lawlessness, lack of security or mismanagement or other problems with education, infrastructure, and the economy (pp. 9-10). He then explores the rationale behind American and European interventions in the Kurdish Question.

The first chapter analyses the debates of the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress from a human rights perspective. It provides a comprehensive historical account of each discussion and a fascinating account of how many members of the European Parliament were following the Kurdish situation in Turkey quite closely and offered extremely detailed points in their analyses. Those were the times when Turkey had a more or less sincere goal of becoming a member of the European Union. Sometimes, as the author demonstrates, the Kurdish Question was used as a bargaining chip to thwart Turkey’s membership aspirations. In the U.S. Congress, the discussions had a slightly different tone, and Ünver argues that Congress focused on applying more sticks than carrots (such as cuts in aid) against Turkish security practices than did the European Parliament (p. 37). Also, while EU parliamentarians recognised the security threats posed by the PKK, Congress rarely acknowledged such

problems. The author's overall argument is that Congress was not as impressed by reforms in Turkey as EU parliamentarians were, and that it was "heavily influenced by the Greek and Armenian lobbyists" (*ibid*). He further posits that the statements made in Congress were "sloganized and sounded canned," which could be explained by the financial relationship between individual members of Congress and campaign donors (*ibid*). Interestingly enough, this argument parallels the Turkish state's official discourse with regards to the criticism it receives from the U.S. Congress. Ünver then provides a table of the European Parliament's national breakdown of discursive preferences with regards to what the author calls as non-state views on human rights, democratisation, excessive force, the Turkish military's role in politics, and PKK violence. The table shows that Germany and Greece were the most vocal critics of Turkey and the predominant topic was human rights and democratisation. With regards to Congress, the primary concern was about human rights followed by use of excessive force by the Turkish military.

In the second chapter, the author shifts to an analysis of the consciousness of state formation by focusing on territorial integrity and national security. He analyses the manifestations of these perspectives in political discourses of European and American executive institutions such as the European Parliament and the Congress and shows that at times Turkey's geostrategic importance and its right to act against terrorism are mentioned more frequently by these institutions. He finds that "in appeasing Turkish behaviour on the Kurdish Question, both European and American 'statists' highlighted Turkey's strategic importance as a NATO frontier, the role it played during the Cold War, as well as more recent, actual help of imposing no-fly zones after the Gulf War ended" (p. 93). The author argues that semantics matter and that different perspectives lead to different understandings of the Kurdish Question, which in the end influences their recommendations for a resolution to this conflict. The third chapter considers parliamentary discussions in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and analyses the discourses under the ten categories mentioned in the introduction. Each category is once more explained from a Turkish point of view with satisfactory details and a clever style. The conclusion wraps up the whole discussion and provides a solid recapitulation of the main arguments of the book. The author ends with a quote from Confucius: "If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone" (p. 151). This book is one of its kind in terms of focusing on discourse in three different contexts and presenting its findings eloquently.

Both books reviewed here focus on different aspects of the Kurdish Question; one of them engages only Kurdish perspectives while the other one completely lacks the Kurdish voice and puts emphasis instead on outsider discourses on the conflict. Each deserves applause in the ways they constructed arguments, conducted fieldwork and gathered data, and presented them thus offering a great deal to the existing literature on the subject. Both should be

read carefully in order to understand the intricacies of resolving the protracted conflict in Turkey and the complexities this process might entail.

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Veli Yadırgı, **The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey – From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic**, *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 334, (ISBN: 9781316848579).*

Veli Yadırgı's debut monograph – *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* – is perhaps one of the more significant scholarly works on the Kurds to be published in recent years. It is significant not only because it is a work of economic history – a rarity in the field – but also due to its ambitious nature. Over the course of five chapters, Yadırgı constructs a sweeping historical narrative that takes the reader from the early sixteenth century to the 2010s. In doing so, he seeks to not only reframe the story of the Kurdish Question with greater reference to the economic history of Eastern and South-Eastern Anatolia (ESA), but also challenge received wisdom on the economic history of this region.

Central to Yadırgı's work is an attempt to demonstrate that the “question of the development in ESA and the Kurdish question of Turkey are inseparable and can be aptly comprehended only in relation to the political, social and economic history of the polities of which it has formed a part, namely the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic” (pp. 57-58). In his review of the existing literature pertaining to the question of ESA underdevelopment and the emergence of the Kurdish Question, Yadırgı observes that “virtually all of the literature analyzing the linkages between economic development in ESA and the Kurdish question has been the hypothesis of regional underdevelopment” (p. 39). Indeed, Yadırgı emphasises the fact that scholars from across the political spectrum have tended to share a common assumption that the underdevelopment of the ESA constituted a historical constant; one that defined the relationship between not only the Republic of Turkey and the region but also its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. It is this assumption that Yadırgı tackles over the course of the book.

As already noted, *the Political Economy of the Kurds in Turkey* is organised into five chapters, the first of which is dedicated to defining the Kurds, providing comprehensive literature review, and outlining the theoretical perspectives that inform the work. On this last count, the influence of the Marxist tradition upon the author is evident. However, he rejects the crude economic determinism, adopting an approach that seeks to highlight the complex dialectical interplay between – to borrow the appropriate Marxian analogy – base and superstructure. In this respect, the work owes more to the tradition of scholars

such as Eric Hobsbawm than the “orthodox” Marxists and “progressive” Kemalists that had previously sought to tie the chronic underdevelopment of ESA to the fraught nature of the Kurdish Question.

The remainder of the work is organised chronologically. Chapter two examines the development of ESA between the establishment of Ottoman rule over the region in the early sixteenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century (1514-1800). Chapter three continues the narrative into nineteenth, charting the social, political, and economic development of ESA in the final century of the Ottoman Empire’s existence (1800-1914). Chapters four and chapter five cover the period of the Republic of Turkey’s formation, consolidation, and development (1914-1980) and in the post-1980 era, the so-called the age of neoliberalism (1980-2010s) respectively.

It is perhaps first necessary to note that, in this impressive effort to reconstruct the history of economic development in ESA and its relationship to the Kurdish Question, Yadırgı utilises an impressive array of sources including British archival documents, Turkish government reports, as well as relevant secondary literature in both English and Turkish. However, perhaps his most significant contribution to the historiography of the Kurdish Question is his rejection of “a stationary understanding of economic (underdevelopment) in the predominantly Kurdish provinces of ESA” (p. 259). In its place, Yadırgı proposes a new periodisation of the region’s economic history, one which is “no longer centred on a unilinear continuum of inadequate development” (p. 260). More precisely, through examining the history of ESA over an extended historical era (1514-2010s) a more complex picture is presented. Most strikingly, Yadırgı ably demonstrates that during the early modern period (1514-1800), far from being an economic backwater, Ottoman Kurdistan was a relatively developed region and an important source of revenue to the imperial treasury. Significantly, this economic golden age (at least when compared with later eras) occurred at a time in which the indigenous ruling classes enjoyed a significant degree of political autonomy.

It is only in the nineteenth century that ESA’s relative economic position begins to deteriorate. Again, developments in the economic sphere are linked to development in the political realm; most notably Ottoman efforts to establish a more centralised mode of provincial administration and the destruction of the network of Kurdish principalities, institutions which had played a major role in regional life in the previous centuries. According to Yadırgı, the economic underdevelopment in the ESA that emerged in nineteenth century was further exacerbated by deliberate policies of *de-development* that sought to ensure Turkish control over the ESA following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. Here Yadırgı highlights a substantial deficit in the historical record, namely a failure “to account comprehensively for the deliberate economic and social extortions and destruction witnessed by the Kurds and other autochthonic peoples of

ESA...” (p. 266). In this sense, far from the Kurdish Question being an “outcome” of economic underdevelopment; the reverse becomes apparent.

Yadırgı completes his study by highlighting the ways in which the economic divergence between ESA and the rest of Turkey has only continued to deepen over the last four decades, despite periodic development projects such as the *Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi* (GAP). He also places the ultimately unsuccessful efforts of Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (2002-) to resolve the Kurdish Question through various “democratization” initiatives within the context this ongoing (and ever worsening) economic disparity. His conclusion is that “the restructuring of the Turkish political and administrative system is an urgent and necessary step...” (p. 276). However, he regards this as insufficient to resolve the Kurdish Question, which has been shaped not only by cultural and political repression but decades of policies that have de-developed the ESA region. Thus, Yadırgı calls upon policymakers to support “public-sector-led” development and, more precisely, policies directed at creating unionised jobs, encouraging education, promoting land reform, and ensuring a fairer use of revenues derived from natural resources (such as energy) produced in ESA.

Yadırgı’s work is worthy of praise on numerous levels. In the broadest sense, it challenges the notion that the underdevelopment of ESA is a “natural” feature of regional life. More precisely, the author shows how this underdevelopment is the product of a set of specific policies dating from the nineteenth century onward and linked to the political and cultural subjugation of the Kurds as well as other indigenous population such as the Armenians and Yazidis.

Beyond this most fundamental contribution, there are aspects of the work that can constitute a jumping off point for further research. For instance, Yadırgı’s assessment of early modern Ottoman Kurdistan relies primarily on published documents. Here there is an opportunity for Ottomanists to conduct further research to determine the validity of Yadırgı’s findings on economic conditions in the region during this period. Equally, his work on economic (de)-development in Turkey’s ESA during the Republican era can form the basis of a comparative study that examines the political economy of the Kurdish-inhabited regions of the other Ottoman successor states, Syria and Iraq. Yadırgı’s research also raises interesting questions pertaining Kurdish regions of Iran, namely whether or not the economic history of “Iranian Kurdistan” mirrors that of ESA. However, perhaps the most controversial aspects of the book will be its policy implications. Yadırgı’s willingness to draw clear and direct policy lessons from his research is commendable. He is deeply critical of top-down development projects (such as the GAP) that not only ignore local actors but also serve to perpetuate ESA’s underdevelopment. His solution, although couched in inoffensive academic language, is unmistakable in the social democratic tradition. The present reviewer certainly agrees with the general policy prescriptions outlined in Yadırgı’s work. Nevertheless, these

conclusions will no doubt raise criticism from those more inclined to neoliberal developmentalism.

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Burak Bilgehan Özpek, **The Peace Process between Turkey and the Kurds: Anatomy of a Failure**, London: Routledge, 2017, 80 pp., (ISBN: 9781138564107).

This work addresses the failure of the “Peace Process” (*Barış Süreci*) between the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government and the Kurdish actors, the PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party) and the HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party). This process had reached its climax during 2013 – 2015. Özpek’s book developed out of a May 19, 2013 newspaper article titled “What a liberal asks for: De-conflicting or Peace?” (“*Bir liberal ne ister: çatışmasızlık mı barış mı?*”) when the peace process was in its heyday. His short piece in the newspaper *Taraf* criticised both sides for a lack of transparency. Consequentially, Özpek was blamed for being cynical about the intentions of the government, the PKK and the HDP.

The introductory chapter outlines the author’s work and focuses on Turkey’s Kurdish Question and its effect on foreign relations. He argues that throughout Turkey’s history, the Kurdish Question has been shaping its relations with its neighboring countries. This has been the case since the very first days of modern Turkey. For instance, Özpek argues that the motivation behind Turkey’s involvement in the Saadabad Pact (1937) was to “contain transnational and secessionist” Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iran and Iraq (p. 3). This treaty of friendly relations and cooperation was signed as a gesture of solidarity between Afghanistan and the three countries aforementioned and it was renewed for once in 1943. Özpek suggests the same dynamics were at stake in the 1950s. The Kurds were involved with the anti-monarchy campaign of 1958 in Iraq. Mustafa Barzani’s return from exile in the Soviet Union alarmed the Menderes government which was concerned about Turkey’s territorial integrity. The Kurdish Question substantially influenced Turkey’s relations with the US and the EU. It caused instability during the last three decades in relations with the US at several turning points, especially during the Gulf War of 1990 – 1991, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The political and military elite of Turkey believed that the US-backed Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was responsible for the rise of insurgency among the Kurds in Turkey. The Kurdish Question also shaped Turkey’s relations with the EU, especially after the end of the Cold War. Amongst others, one of the EU’s conditions for Turkey’s EU accession bid was the settlement of the Kurdish Question by peaceful means.

In the first chapter, Özpek provides a historical background of the Kurdish Question and makes some important observations. He aptly states that throughout Turkey’s modern history, the Kurdish Question has been used as a

political tool to maintain power and eliminate oppositional groups. In this vein, the Kemalists during the early Republican period viewed the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925 as an opportunity to crush political opposition. Suppressing more than a dozen rebellions in the Kurdish regions of Turkey, the Kemalists implemented their policies of assimilation and nation-building. They established a specific *status quo* implemented in these regions. In the relative atmosphere of political liberalisation during the Democrat Party (DP, 1950 – 1961) however, several prominent Kurdish figures were elected as deputies to the parliament. The DP did not attempt to modify the official view of the Kemalist *status quo*, and considered the Kurdish Question nothing more than an election issue. The DP government tried to appease the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and avert the pressure on its administration by imprisoning Kurdish student organisations, which had protested against the state suppression of Kurdish political parties in Iraq. Following the new constitution revised after the 1961 *coup d'état*, public space was opened for civil society and political pluralism. This led to the establishment of Kurdish political organisations. Such civil liberties did not eradicate the Turkish establishment's approach to the Kurdish Question. Indeed, Turkey criminalised the Kurdish nationalist and cultural movements further. The TSK used this as a pretext to rationalise the 1971 intervention and the 1980 *coup d'état*. After the 1980 coup, the military intervened in politics as well as the Kurdish Question. Meanwhile, the PKK monopolised the Kurdish national liberation movement by initiating systematic anti-state violence. During this period the PKK imitated political vocabulary and symbols of Turkish nationalism. On the other hand, the political and military elites in Ankara instrumentalised the violent environment in order to legitimise their power. The PKK's strategy was to bring the government to the negotiation table. After the second half of the 1990s, the national security discourse dominated the political scene, pushing aside democratic and developmental objectives.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, Özpek states, polarisation began in Turkish politics between the “conservative globalism” camp, represented by the AKP, and the “defensive nationalism” camp, mostly comprising the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), and the nationalist conservative Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The TSK, as a guardian of secularism and nation-state principles, took the side of the defensive nationalist camp and remained skeptical of AKP's agenda. The AKP government used democratic reforms and a well-designed strategy of full EU membership in order to push the military out of politics. The government added the Kurdish Question to its agenda after 2007 when many high-ranking generals and retired officers were accused of planning to overthrow the government. After 2009, the AKP government initiated the peace process in two phases. The first phase, called “democratic opening” (*demokratik açılım*), officially named “the national unity and brotherhood project” (*milli birlik ve kardeşlik projesi*), failed after the nationalist circles sharply criticised the government and claimed that it

encouraged Kurdish secession. Following the 2011 parliamentary elections the government initiated “the peace process” (*barış süreci*) (also known as the “solution process” (*çözüm süreci*)) in January 2013. For the first time in Turkey’s history, a government decided to settle the Kurdish Question through peaceful means.

The second chapter analyses the Kurdish Question from an international relations theories perspective, instead of presenting a full and detailed history of the process. This is where the author conceptualises the case of the Kurdish Question. First, he explains why the conflict between the Kurds and Turkey should be called an intra-state “civil war”. Özpek conceives that the suppression of Kurdish identity and the environment of insecurity created by the state are to blame for the civil war. This theoretical framework is followed by the author’s claim that the AKP government classified this conflict as a civil war, even though the author does not refer to any official statement on this point, and regards the PKK as the addressee of the Kurdish Question. Özpek proposes that a realistic approach on both sides to the peace initiative existed. He elucidates that according to the “strategic peace” approach, peace is as rational and strategic as war. Thus, the peace process in Turkey is seen as a contextual silence, which “is temporal and valid until the existent conditions change” (p. 31). Özpek finalises the chapter by suggesting that both sides, the AKP government and the PKK, “instrumentalized the peace process in order to maximize their interests” (p. 33). Related with this point the author highlights in the following chapters that the AKP government led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had a political leaning towards the instrumentalisation of the peace process, while the HDP under the leadership of Selahattin Demirtaş insisted on not using it for “political gain” or turning it into a “bargaining chip”. Even though the peace process was declared void by Erdoğan, when 33 students calling for peace were killed by an attack on July 21, 2015 in Suruç and a day after two Turkish police officers were killed in Ceylanpınar, both the AKP and the PKK started and ended the peace process because their strategic interest “converged in January 2013 and diverged following the June, 7th elections in 2015” (p. 60).

The third and fourth chapters focus on the downfall of the peace process after the June 7, 2015 parliamentary elections. The AKP lost its previous majority in parliament and deemed HDP’s success as the main reason for this. The ensuing violence pushed the AKP to take a militaristic and nationalistic stance. In conclusion, the author emphasises the importance of the AKP government’s departure from the securitisation of the Kurdish Question. He argues the pattern set in modern Turkish political history did not change in terms of the instrumentalisation of the issue. The author concludes that the peace process did not receive permanent support from the opposition parties and non-state actors because the AKP government and the PKK carried out negotiations alone, and did not inform the society much about the content.

Several limitations of the book require comments. It appears that the book does not provide much background on the initial years of the peace process, which took place between 2009 and 2013, as well as the aftermath of 2015 when the negotiations collapsed and the assault on the Kurdish cities started, especially in Sur, Yüksekova, Silopi, Cizre and İdil. Özpek also does not elaborate on the mission and report presented by the “Wise People Committee” (*Akil İnsanlar Heyeti*). This 63 members committee was comprised of high profile figures of academia, civil society, business associations, media and the arts. The Wise People Committee was not in the center of the peace process, however they received wide public support because they represented a civilian aspect in terms of the peace negotiations. This is part of the author’s wider omission of the reactions from civil society organisations, student organisations, and cultural organisations. The focus is mostly on political actors. The author therefore decides not to discuss content provided in newspapers, journals and TV programs reflecting these reactions. Instead, he engages on the scholarship produced on the Kurdish Question and ethnic conflicts around the world. Despite these shortcomings, the author presents a very concise, readable and analytical timeline of the peace process on the Kurdish Question in Turkey.

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